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DENVER DOLL'S VICTORY; or, SKULL AND CROSS-BONES.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "GILT-EDGED DICK," "BONANZA BILL," ETC., ETC.



"HOLD UP, THAR, CROSS-BONES! TETCH A HAIR OF DOLL'S HEAD AN' I'LL RIDDLE YE LIKE A GATLING!"

Denver Doll's Victory; OR, SKULL AND CROSS-BONES.

BY E. L. WHEELER,
AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS,
"ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "DENVER
DOLL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A WILD NIGHT AND A WILDER RIDE.

NIGHT wild and furious settled over mother earth, with the hot wind of summer blowing a literal hurricane through forest and gulch, carrying sticks, leaves and other rubbish with it.

The lightning, too, flashed in vivid zig-zig streaks, and the thunder jarred the earth with its loud rolling, as heavy cannonry might have done.

Down in a dark ravine between the mountains, which was for the most part choked up by trees of sparse foliage, flickered a little camp-fire of pine cones, which every sudden gust of wind threatened to scatter to the different points of the compass.

A short, stout Dutchman, of immense girth, but otherwise rather attractive appearance, was kept busy in replenishing the fire, while Denver Doll, well known through the mountains as an exceptionally pretty and expert detective, was seated upon the ground before the low stump of a tree, upon which a telegraph instrument was placed, which she was watching with eager, expectant eyes.

Ever and anon she would glance anxiously at the sky, with its ominous mantle of skurrying clouds, from which the rain threatened to fall at any moment.

Directly overhead, but a number of feet above her, ran two telegraph wires across the gulch. Two wires attached to her telegraph instrument also connected with the main wires overhead, thus enabling her to receive all the messages that passed over the line in either direction.

"Dunderation!" pealed from the lips of Yakie Strauss, Denver Doll's companion, as a sudden gust of wind carried a stone against the side of his head, and toppled him over upon the ground. "Sdop! sdop! dot ish no fair, shinglin' sdoneas at a veller, und preakin' his skull. Don'd like dot, Denver Doll; don'd vas like der situation nohow."

"Well, have patience, Yakie, and we will get out of here before long. When you see a stick or stone coming at you, why all you've got to do is dodge it!" Doll said, with a musical laugh, which, however, was suddenly cut short by the click! click! of the telegraph instrument, to which she instantly gave her whole attention.

Yakie, too, came forward, forgetting his trouble, and crouched by the stump, seeming to be fully as expectant as his young companion, whom he had served in more than one thrilling detective experience.

"Shimminy blazes! dot vas der fooiniest talkin' machine I effer see someveres. All id say vas tick! tick! und der like ash dot, und yet you understand yoost so well ash a spellin' pook all apoud vot ish spraken. Vas, Dollbaby?"

"Of course, Yakie. If I couldn't understand the signs, there would be no use of our being here. But, keep still now. I want to catch everything."

The message came faster now, and there was a perfect tattoo of ticks, that caused Yakie to open his eyes in astonishment—but the eyes of the detective queen dilated with horror, as she jotted down the message.

"Great guns! It is a fortunate thing I suspected mischief," she observed, finally. "There is a horrible scheme afoot to wreck the eastward bound Union Pacific Express, at Devil's Curve, around which she sails at a speed of forty miles an hour, down grade. The instigators of the job belong in Nugget Notch and Big Pine camps. The offices there are either in charge of the conspirators and their associates, or else connection has been made outside of each camp, for the furtherance of this diabolical scheme. Here's the message, so far as it goes."

She handed him a slip of paper, which he bore close to the firelight, and scanned critically, to read as follows:

"Sally, B. P. C. . . . Midnight. . . . U. P., east. Devil's Curve. . . . Big swag. . . . Be ready. S. & C. B. N. N."

Not being much of a scholar, it took Yakie some time to make it out.

"Vell, dot vas pad!" he grunted, finally. "It looks ash off somepody vas goin' to get hurt, don'd it?"

"Exactly, unless we prevent it!" the brave girl cried, excitedly.

"Und how vas dot goin' done? Uff we go up mit der Dufel's Curve, ve ketch der dufel, not?"

"Likely. There will be a gang on hand to plunder the wreck, from Nugget Notch, at least, and maybe another party from Big Pine; so that we could do no good there. The only plan I see is for me to set the spurs to my horse, and to get to the other side of Nugget Notch in time to flag the train!"

"Dot vas foolishness. Vat time she vas?"

Denver Doll nervously drew a handsome gold watch from her pocket and glanced at it.

"It is ten minutes of eleven."

"Und der train is due—?"

"At ten minutes after twelve, at Devil's Curve."

"Shimminy plazes! How you t'ink you get to der odder side off Nugget Notch py dot time? It ish more ash dwenty miles!"

"Yes, by the regular round-about stage trail, but not by the railroad track. I can do the proper distance in an hour, and I will do it, if I die trying! Bring Colonel at once!"

"Vas? You ride mit der railroad track down? You preak your neck off!"

"Bah! Colonel can leap any two culverts on the road. Bring him, at once!"

Yakie stumbled away, and soon returned, leading a handsome roan steed, whose fiery eye, and proud step, and arching neck, proclaimed him a thoroughbred.

Without delay, Denver Doll mounted and prepared for her journey.

"Vot ish to pecoome of me?" Yakie asked, rather dubiously, as the thunder crashed louder.

"Uff I stay here I got de plues."

"Pshaw! don't be scared. Just take the instrument, mount your horse, and set out for Nugget Notch by the regular trail. I will join you there after I flag the train."

She then rode away down the ravine, and in ten minutes came to the track of the Union Pacific railroad, which she proceeded to follow in a westward course. Ahead of her lay Nugget Notch, a rough mining town; a couple of miles to the right of the railroad, behind her, lay the Devil's Curve, where the road ran abruptly around the mountain over a dug-way bed, the sheer promontory arising on one side, and a black abyss bordering the other side of the track. A misplaced rail or a pile of rocks at this point could not help throwing a train off into the yawning gulf, and causing its utter destruction, upon the jagged rocks in the gloomy gorge below.

Denver Doll had seen the place, and her heart sickened with horror as she thought of a train-load of humanity being ruthlessly hurled into the eternity of that black abyss.

She knew that she was liable to encounter danger by following the track, but that was of slight moment to her, if she could save the train.

So she set the spurs into Colonel's flanks, and the spirited charger dashed away at a speed that showed him to be a racer of no mean quality.

Over the culverts he dashed, with nimble leaps, the young Detective Queen sitting her saddle with perfect ease, and urging him, until they fairly flew over the ties between the rails.

And though she watched her horse carefully, the brave girl also kept a close watch ahead, and around her, which she was enabled to do by the frequent flashes of lightning.

When there was no lightning, all was as black as Stygia, and she had to trust much to the sagacity of her horse, not being able to see two feet in advance.

She had not been mistaken in her estimation that she would meet enemies along the route—outposts, as it were, of the gang of marauders.

Once she heard something whiz back of her, and judged it was a lasso, but could see no one.

Fearing a chance bullet might catch her, she urged Colonel on to a still faster gait.

On! on! on!

Five minutes more, and she tore madly past

—madly by the gloomy station, unchecked by

And she had not yet passed the shanty which answered as the station for Nugget Notch.

On! on! on!

Five minutes more, and she tore madly past

—madly by the gloomy station, unchecked by

half a dozen pistol shots that were sent after her, from the darkness.

A quarter mile more she made, when—

Hark! The shriek of a locomotive whistle was heard above the roar of the storm.

The express, some minutes late, was almost upon her!

With a yell she leaped Colonel into the ditch beside the track, and brought him to a standstill. Slipping to the ground, she procured a torch from her saddle-bag, and with difficulty lit it, and leaped up the embankment to the track, just as the express came tearing around the bend at a speed of forty miles an hour!

She waved her torch to and fro above her head, and screamed at the top of her voice, frantic with fear that no heed would be taken of her.

But when the engine was within fifty feet of her, the engineer blew the whistle, as a signal for down brakes.

The grade at this point was very steep, and the train was long and heavily laden, so that it was some distance from where Denver Doll was standing, ere it could be brought to a standstill.

But the cars had scarcely passed the brave girl, ere she was seized from behind, the torch dashed to the ground and extinguished, and a cloak thrown over her head and stuffed into her mouth.

She was then raised in a strong pair of arms, which held her so tightly that she could not move, and in a moment more she was conscious of being borne swiftly away on horseback.

Nor was it until she was nearly suffocated, and they were at a safe distance from the railroad track, that the blanket was removed, so that she could see and breathe.

Her head was thrust in under her captor's arm, however, so that she could not get a glimpse of his face.

She saw, however, to her satisfaction, that they were mounted upon her own horse; she had never owned a horse she thought as much of as Colonel.

"There! you keep mum, now, or I'll knife you!" her captor said, gruffly. "You kin count yourself lucky I didn't kill you, when I found you flaggin' thet aire express."

"That was my business, to baffle you murderers!" Doll cried firmly.

"But ye didn't succeed in your undertaking!" the villain sneered. "The train will be in perdition by the time we get to head-quarters. When the captain comes, he'll fix you, I'll guarantee!"

Doll did not reply.

In fact, she did not know what to say.

Her sudden capture had taken her at a great disadvantage, and she could not plan ahead, not knowing what would be done with her.

The ride lasted about an hour, through a wild, ravenous pass of the mountains,—ravenous because wolves were seen howling and skurrying on either side, while the jagged precipitous walls arose in rugged grandeur, to the right and left.

At last Denver Doll's captor drew rein.

It was in a rugged glen, where a camp-fire was burning, in under a ledge of rock.

Before this fire stood a number of figures, clad in long, somber gowns, belted at the waist.

Masked was each face, while on every breast glowed spectrally the ghastly sign of a grinning skull and cross bones!

CHAPTER II.

A QUEER CUSTOMER.

DENVER DOLL was promptly taken from the arms of her captor and bound to a sapling outside of the camp fire, where the rain beat down upon her mercilessly.

The Black Gowns crept beneath the shelter of the ledge and engaged in a low conversation that was not audible to Doll.

No movement was made to approach her until toward daybreak, when two horsemen, attired like the others, rode into the glen and dismounted.

The Black Gowns then emerged from under the ledge, and one of them said:

"Well, captain, what success?"

"Just as we calculated. The train ran off the track and broke up. We secured what plunder was available and sloped. The express car fetched a purty good load of swag, but the passengers did not pan out much besides watches and rings," and as he spoke the man took from his pocket a handful of finger-rings and jingled them before the eyes of his comrades.

One, in particular, of very peculiar design, attracted the attention of Denver Doll—a massive diamond in an odd, hand-shaped setting.

It struck the Detective Queen that it had belonged to some beautiful young lady—perhaps some newly-made bride, to whom it had been given as a wedding-ring.

"Were ther passengers killed?" one of the Black Gowns demanded as the captain ceased speaking.

"The majority of them were killed, a good many were fatally wounded, and a few made their escape. The only wonder is that all were not killed outright. However, the train went down on its broadside. Who is this girl you have here in boy's clothing?"

"Dunno her name, boss. Captured her a-flaggin' the train over on the U. P. She kim ridin down the track like a streak of greased lightning from the direction of the Notch station."

"Oho! she's the one, then, that some o' the boys told of firin' at to-night? What is your name, young woman?"

"None of your business," Doll replied, independently, and with a promptness that was characteristic of her.

"Look out! none of your sauce to me, or I'll learn you better. I'm Captain Crime, of the Terrible Tribunal."

"I don't care were you Satan himself," was the plucky girl's rejoinder. "You can't scare me one whit, because I've met such characters before. If you are very anxious to find out who I am, find out, that's all!"

Captain Crime uttered a growl of disapproval. "I've a good mind to knife you!" he said, fiercely. "You've entirely too sharp a tongue for a small child."

"I've got one sharp enough to talk for the right, you bet!" Doll retorted. "I can talk the lightning-rods off'n a court-house, too!"

"Enough of this nonsense. Did you flag the express to-night?"

"Reckon I did."

"What did you do it for?"

"Because I wanted to!"

"Answer me better than that!" and the chief of the Terribles drew a pistol.

"Because I wanted to prevent the horrible massacre of innocents at Devil's Curve. I rode from twelve miles the other side of Nugget Notch to prevent your crime."

"But Crime triumphed in spite of you, you see. How did you find out anything about the proposed wreck of the train?"

"None of your business again!"

"You shall learn better. It has just dawned upon me who you are. You are a detective, and I reckon I have heard of you. You are Denver Doll."

Doll did not answer, but smiled scornfully.

"You are Denver Doll, and I suppose you have come here to wage war on us, eh?" the captain continued.

"I've no reply to make to anything that you may surmise," Doll retorted. "Think as you like, and do as you like. I am simply your prisoner."

"I reckon it will be safest for the interests of the Tribunal to shoot you, Denver Doll, and get rid of you!" he said, drawing a revolver again. "Dead men, or women, tell no tales. Five minutes for prayers; so improve them!"

"Hold up thar, Cross-Bones! Tech a hair of Doll's head an' I'll riddle ye like a Gatling!"

The members of the Terrible Tribunal gazed around in great astonishment at the sound of the boyish voice, and beheld standing near a diminutive specimen of humanity whose age apparently could not have exceeded ten years, and his face not his figure was what gave him the appearance of being that old.

He was extremely ragged and dirty, and barefooted in the bargain, but his sturdy, resolute face, with its big mouth, pug nose, cunning black eyes, and fringe of unkempt hair made him a curious character.

He stood in a defiant, half-pompous attitude, facing the desperadoes, and each hand leveled a cocked revolver of the "bull-dog" brand, unwaveringly.

Captain Crime took a good look at the lad, and then burst into a loud laugh.

"Well, by the Rockies!" he ejaculated, "if that ain't the cutest thing I've seen in a year. I say, bub, who are you?"

"I'm Bill Bethel, you bet, and I'm sum on my muscle, too, Sally. So, if you don't want to get slugged, jest you untie thet aire gal, and hand her over to my protection."

Captain Crime looked at the boy again.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Why I've a notion to paralyze you where you stand!"

Little Bill laughed.

"Large trees from little acorns grow, but I don't scare worth a cent," he answered, unflinch-

ingly. "If I hadn't the drop on you and the power to watch it and nurse it, I'd stand no show. But I've got an eye that says that these 'ere two death-dispensers is lookin' at every galoot in the gang?"

Even though he laughed before he spoke, his speech was stern and meaning, and that of a man instead of a boy.

That he meant business, no one could doubt, and even Captain Crime, steeped as he was in the vice from which he took his name, could do no better than hesitate and consider.

Seven men stood at bay, and one slender but determined boy held them there.

It seemed foolish to acknowledge him the victor, but rather than get the contents of his revolvers, every man felt like weakening.

Little Bill evidently knew it, for he said:

"Business is business. The old lady brought me up on pistols, and Billiam is a deadshot from Deadshotville. I'm a nervy little cuss, too, and when I say a thing, you can bet I'm going to throw myself to do it."

"If you don't get out of here mighty quick, I'll have you skinned, alive!" Crime growled, savagely. "We ain't quite so green as to allow ourselves to be backed down by a boy."

"But you are, all the same, and I'm jest the sort of a rooster what was brought up to keep my eye peeled for such sharps. Release the gal and turn her over to me, before I count three, or I'll let drive at you! One!"

And up came the weapons to bear more fully, and the flash in the little black eyes of the stranger might have been regarded as exceedingly dangerous.

Captain Crime saw it, and so did his men, and of one accord, they shrunk back in dread of being shot.

"Let up!" Crime called out. "You've got the drop, youngster, and durned if you ain't the pluckiest kid I ever met. Therefore, you shall have the girl, and your liberty. But, beware, both of you! The third time after receiving the notice of the skull and cross-bones, your doom is sealed. So be prepared!"

He stepped forward and severed the bonds that held Doll to the sapling, and motioned for her to depart.

She walked over to the side of Little Bill, and together they backed down the gorge, Bill maintaining his cover with the pistols, until they were safe away from the outlaws' camp.

It was then Denver Doll seized Bill by the hand, and thanked him warmly.

"You are a brave boy," she said, "and you will always have a friend in me. Who are you, and where do you belong?"

"Oh! I'm Kate's kid—Kate's my old woman, you know. She cum down to a place called Deathly Ditch, or sum sech a place, hereabouts, an' left me up in the mountings a-grubbin' at a poor claim, with pick and pan. Sed she had 'portant bizness, over heer, but I got lonesum, an' so jest buckled on my armor, and dropped along after her, to see what the old gal is up to."

"Won't you get scolded?"

"Pooh! no! Kate knows better'n to tan my jacket, bet you, fer I'm all the protection and s'port she's got. We gets along famuss, but she sorter 'pears to have give me the slip, this trip. Know of sech a place as Muggin's Notch, Death Ditch, or sum sech a name, up in this section?"

"You mean Nugget Notch, I guess. I'm bound for there, myself."

"Then, I'm with ye. I wanten find Kate, as soon as possible, for thar's no tellin' now'days, what these gals fall into, in the way o' danger, if they ain't got a purtecter, like me."

Doll could but laugh at the boy's remarkable self-conceit, though it was evident that he was nobody's fool, in the way of worldly wisdom.

Their journey to Nugget Notch occupied the best share of the day, as they were obliged to go on foot; and then, too, their route was rugged and tortuous.

At last, however, the place was reached—a wild, rough mining-camp, like which a hundred could be found scattered through the mountains.

There were the usual irregular clusters of shanties, cabins and tents, here and there being one more pretentious than the rest. Then there was the inevitable grocery store, several saloons, dance-houses, and gaming-dens, a shanty post-office, a theater, and a bank.

The theater was a long one-story shed, which would have been much more appropriate as a barn than for its present calling.

However, it was the popular resort of the camp, for "fun," and more than once had pistol-shots therein awakened the echoes and added to the regular performance.

When Denver Doll and Little Bill arrived in the town, however, the theater had no attractions, for the denizens, who filled the gulch street, in knots, were engaged in the discussion of some important topic, which proved to be concerning the train disaster.

Every one was terribly excited, and the threats made against the perpetrators of the crime, were not few, nor by any means friendly.

Frenzy seemed to possess the majority. The deputy had already arrived, and was instituting inquiries, in hopes of getting track of some of the ringleaders, who were supposed to belong in Nugget Notch, which camp had the reputation of containing more rogues and rascals, than any other in the territory.

Denver Doll's appearance in the town attracted considerable attention, but no one offered to molest her, nor her ragged companion, Bill Bethel.

After about an hour's search, she found Yakie Strauss, her Teutonic comrade. He was comfortably stowed away in one corner of a saloon, complacently making a meal on cheese and crackers, and a mug of whisky, for which latter article, he had an inordinate fondness.

He looked up, with a comical expression, as Doll approached, as much as to say "I vas all right—how you vas?"

Doll looked carefully around her to see that she was not watched, then said:

"Well, what news?"

"Loads!" Yakie grunted. "Train run off track—shmash all mit dunder."

"So I am aware. I missed warning them, though I brought the train to a stop."

She then explained all about her adventure, which narration caused Yakie to open his eyes in wonder.

"Shemminy blazes! dot vas noddinks. I haff swi' times pigger adventure ash dot."

"Indeed! Let's hear about it."

"Vell, I dells you. Afer you skin oud and leaf me alone mit mineself, I don'd vas come straighd to dis place, but takes a valse ofer to a place vere I could vatch der Dufel's Curve. Purdy soon, pyme py, along comes der exbress train, und tumbles off into der gorge, yooost like rollin' off a log. Den der vas screechin', und howlin', und, shimminy gracious! der dufel und his imps dey vas skootin' around, like goot fellers. Den purdy quick dey disappear, und I goes down mit der wreck. I finds von young mans, mit a hole in his head, and he say he giff me ein t'ousan' dollars if I hide him vere nobody could find him. So I put him ofer mine shoulder, und pring him someveres, git mine t'ousan', und come right away here!"

"But where did you leave the young man, Yakie?" Doll asked, with curiosity.

"Dot ish my secret," the Teuton answered, with a broad grin. "You und I vas pards, Dollbapy, but you have your little secrets, und so haff I. You ax me no questions, I dells you no fibs, all der w'ile."

"Never mind, Dolly—just leave it to me, and I'll unwind the ball of yarn for you," Little Bill now remarked, with a wink. "I ain't very big, but I'm lots on the pry, and can cut around the world, and take Germany, any day!"

"Vas? you can, hey?" Yakie blustered, indignantly. "You vas a shmell fry!"

"But you can't cook me, though!" William retorted, putting his thumb comically to his nose. "I'm a thoroughbred, I am, and since Kate's skipped me, I've hitched up wi' Denver Doll. By the way, Dolly, I've got a little important business about town, and will see you later. Cucoo!"

And away the youngster strutted, with a pompous swagger that was decidedly amusing—at least the Detective Queen thought so, as she gazed after him.

She also turned away, leaving Yakie to finish his lunch; for she hardly knew how to regard his action concerning the man he claimed to have concealed.

She had never before had any reason to doubt him, as, with exception of a few eccentricities, his actions had always been loyal to her.

"I'll leave it to Little Bill to look into the case," she mused, as she left the place, and sauntered down the street. "The kid is as sharp as a weasel, and would work up into a rattling detective, I fancy. He is as close as a steel-trap concerning Kate, whom he claims to be hunting for. There are many mysteries in life, and there's one here, I'll wager."

Half a block down the street, she met a well-dressed man, who took the liberty to blockade her path, and tip his hat to her.

"Excuse me," he said. "Are you not Denver Doll?"

CHAPTER III.

RIENZIO.

LET us follow Little Bill Bethel.

Denver Doll had not gone wide of her mark, in estimating him to be shrewd, keen and wily, and having the making in him of a thoroughbred detective.

Whoever had reared him, or wherever he had come from, it mattered not, but he was decidedly a boy of boys, with the head of a man upon him, together with no end of cool, calculating courage, and a knowledge of things in general that was far beyond his seeming years.

After leaving the presence of Denver Doll and Yalie, he sauntered about town for some time, taking in such scenes as attracted his attention, until he finally came to the "theater," which had opened its doors for the night, as the laborers' day's work was virtually closed, and they were flocking into the camp, to spend what dust they had earned that day.

Before the theater, which was called the Globe, was a bulletin, upon which was mounted a hand-printed poster announcing that "the favorite and celebrated Viennese Nightingale, Rienzo, would positively appear, every night, in a choice operatic programme; also several distinguished high-kickers, boxers, and nigger performers."

Little Bill read the announcement, and pondered over it for some minutes, and then searched in the pockets of his ragged pants till he found a gold half-eagle.

"I'll take in that racket, if I bu'st!" he muttered. "Now there was my old gal, Kate—she was a hopperatic sort o' singer, and et would be jest one'r capers to change names an' go on the stage."

So Bill paid his entrance fee, four bits, and found himself within Nugget Notch's theater.

As once before stated, it was a long building, only one story in height, and the inside was fully as rough as the out.

The floor was covered with tiers of tables supplied with chairs.

At the further end was a sort of stage across the end of the building, while in front of it was a piano, upon which a man was thumping out some tremendous music, the curtain being down and no performance having commenced.

The bar was at the front end of the building, on one side of the door, and was presided over by a huge negro, as black as the ace of spades, who looked able to handle any three or four ordinary men.

The apartment was partly filled, the rude audience consisting of miners, ruffians and loafers, and representatives of the different classes of humanity that made up the town.

At a number of the tables, men were engaged at cards, and with a keen twinkle in his eye, Little Bill sauntered about, first from one table to the other, and looked on at the games.

He finally came to one table where the game was of more than ordinary interest, for several men were assembled there besides the two who were seated at the board.

One of these was a young man, some twenty years of age, whose form was none too robust, and whose white complexion and haggard look about the eyes gave testimony, as well as a frequent hacking cough, that he was inclined to consumption. He was nevertheless rather prepossessing of countenance, with deep blue eyes, a pleasant mouth, shaded by a light mustache, and close curling hair.

His companion at the table was a decidedly sportsman-looking individual, the glitter of whose brilliant black eyes was ample proof that he was of that order of human beings, who was confident that he could sail easily through life without working hard to do it.

He was attired in a blue suit, with an immaculate white vest, shirt and collar, while upon his head was a snow-white sombrero, pinned up at one side and ornamented with a colored plume. His feet were incased in slippers.

In figure he was of commanding stature, while in face he was what most people would have called handsome.

He had a peculiar smiling expression ever on his cleverly-chiseled features, that had something mockingly irresistible about it; he wore a sweeping blond mustache, with luxuriant long hair to match; his hands were as fair as a woman's; his shirt front and fingers literally gleamed with diamonds.

The peering eyes of Little Bill Bethel took in all the peculiarities of the scene as he pushed his way along to a position.

The game, seven-up, had just ended, and the gambler sport had just raked in a number of gold pieces and slipped them into his pocket.

"You're out of luck, Ainsley!" he said, with one of his peculiar smiles. "What's got into you? You can't play seven-up for shucks any more!"

Ainsley's white cheeks flushed, as he thrust his hand into his pocket.

"I'm not broke yet!" he said, grimly, as he brought forth two twenty-dollar gold pieces and laid one of them upon the table. "You've soaked away my money long enough, Beau Blonde, and it's my turn to retrieve my losses. Waiter, bring me a gin-and-whisky and a fresh pack of cards."

A quiet smile of self-confidence flitted over Beau Blonde's face.

"Sorry for you, Ned, but you must admit that I play a fair game. Better go light, till you get a run of luck."

"Don't ye do it, Johnny!" piped in Little Bill, at this juncture. "Jest ye go yer forty—hull swine or no swag—an' ef ye don't win, I'll step in and tear the lining out of his nibs!"

All eyes were turned upon the boy, who had, until now been quite unnoticed.

"Hello! what you doing in here, you little rat?" Beau Blonde cried, roughly. "Get up and dust now, or I'll wring your infernal little neck!"

"Dry up, will you!" Bill retorted, importantly. "I paid to get inter this show, an' I'm goin' to see her out. Ef ye beat his jags, here, I'll jest go ye a pop fer fifty a side, pervidin' I can get some sponserble man to back me. Why, I kin beat ther man w'ot invented the cards, at seven-up."

"Never mind the kid. Come on, put up, and let's play!" Ned Ainsley said, eagerly. "If I lose this time, hanged if I don't match the little chap against you!"

Beau Blonde laughed loudly at the idea. "The ragamuffin don't know a Jack o' Spades from an Ace of Hearts!" he remarked, contemptuously.

"You're another!" Bill declared. "I uster eat keards when other fodder were skeerce."

The cards were produced, and Beau Blonde and Ned Ainsley played their game, the stakes being forty dollars a side, eleven points game.

It was a short and easily-won victory for the sport, he scoring four times, thrice in succession, Ainsley getting no hands worth playing.

"Now, then!" Blonde chuckled, raking in the stake, "are you done?"

"By no means!" Ainsley replied, rising.

"I'll back the boy against you for fifty a side. Here, youngster, take the seat!"

"Bah! I'll not waste time on such small fry. It's ag'in' the law to gamble with boys!" Beau Blonde blustered.

"Law or no law, you'll give me a show for my money, or I'll salivate you!" Ainsley declared, quickly drawing and cocking a revolver. "Will you play?"

"Well, if you're so anxious to lose your cash, yes!" the gambler answered. "I'll beat the little whelp in no time. Put up."

Ned Ainsley laid his last fifty on the table, just a little doubtful as to whether he would ever see it again.

"Now, boy, do your best!" he said, encouragingly.

"But, see here—whar's my spec comin' in, fer exertin' myself. Goin' to divy?"

"Yes, if you win, I'll divide, and give you a third. Fair?"

"Kerect. Squar' yourself, Beauty! Cut for deal!"

The cards were cut and dealt, and the game began, Bill leading the Jack of Hearts, and later scooping in three times.

Beau Blonde spoke not, but the scowl upon his usually smiling face, indicated his annoyance and anger.

Little Bill evidently knew perfectly well what he was about, for he played with cool confidence, whistling the while.

Toward its close the points stood tie, and there appeared but small chance for the boy to win.

But, win he did, amid the cheers of the spectators, and to Beau Blonde's intense chagrin.

"You infernal little skunk, I'll kick you out of doors!" he roared. "What d'ye mean by stickin' yourself in here, where you're not wanted?"

"Oh! I jest kin in to see ther menagerie, an' whipped the tiger—that's all," Bill replied, with a grin. "Never did know much 'bout keards, tho' my old man used ter be ther boss, they say! Goin' ter back me ag'in, Ainsley, old chub?"

"With all my heart?" was the reply. "I'll put up a hundred!"

"Good! I'll go you two to one!" Beau Blonde cried. "If I don't make the baby look sick, this time, you can call me chaff."

The money was staked—two hundred dollars against half the amount—and the game began.

A large crowd had now collected, and the game was watched with interest, for the contrast of players was something novel at Nugget Notch.

Beau Blonde had the repute of being the most successful card sharp in the mountains, and that he should allow a mere child to beat him at his favorite game, twice in succession, seemed so improbable that many outside bets were made on the result of the game.

Beau Blonde played slowly, carefully. Little Bill played quickly, and whistled.

"Told ye I didn't know much erbout keards, Beau!" he remarked, as he made high, low, jack on the first deal. "Why, I've got a grizzly b'ar up hum, thet kin beat me every game."

"You've too much mouth!" Blonde snarled. "Know it—bin told so, before," Bill grunted.

"Ther hull family hed big vittles-traps. There's my old man, when he opened his mouth ye could see his brains, an' my big brother got mad and swallowed his self one day. Wonderful family. High, jack, game, please!"

Beau Blonde's teeth went together with a click.

"Curse my infernal luck," he gritted.

"I'll watch you closer, young fellow. If you come any trickery on me, I'll blow your brains out."

"You had better watch yourself, on thet score," Little Bill retorted. "I'm alive to all yer moves, buddy."

And the game went on.

In the last deal Bill made three points, which put him out, and he again raked in the stakes, with a triumphant whistle.

And again the crowd cheered.

Beau Blonde arose with an oath.

His face was pale with the passion he was evidently trying to withhold.

"That will do for the present," he said. "I will play with you some other time, Ned Ainsley. The concert will soon begin, now!"

"Very well!" Ainsley assented, as the gambler walked away.

"Hello! Chaffy, ain't goin' ter take water, aire ye?" shouted Little Bill.

Beau Blonde looked back with an ugly scowl, but did not answer.

"Oh! he's got it in for me, has Blondey!" the lad chuckled. "First you know some one will find my cadaver lying in an out-of-the-way place, ready for the undertaker."

"Never fear," Ned Ainsley replied. "Beau Blonde is more bark than bite; still it will do no harm to keep a sharp outlook. How much do you want, Billy?"

"Fifty will do me!" was the boy's modest answer, and Ainsley handed it over without a murmur.

Feeling as rich as a king, Billy then made his way as far front as possible to get a position so that he could hear the prima donna, who was to vocalize.

He finally succeeded in getting a perch up on a barrel, from where he could obtain a plain view of the stage, and there waited full as impatiently as the rough audience.

Beau Blonde stood near the stage, leaning against the wall, his face clouded, and eyes gleaming with an ugly light, so that he did not appear like his usual self.

Not far behind him was a man of about his own build, with a heavy brown mustache and hair worn long over his shoulders—a rather handsome fellow, who was attired in finely tanned buckskin and wore a broad-brim hat set back upon his head. A couple of revolvers were in his belt, while he leaned carelessly upon his rifle, with his eyes fixed upon the stage curtain.

Finally after the room was packed full, and the audience began to get noisy with impatience, an overture was banged off upon the piano, and the curtain was rung up.

A short pause—then Mlle. Rienzo swept out upon the stage.

The next instant a pin could have been heard to drop upon the floor.

Every eye was fastened upon the beauteous face and figure of the singer, as she stood for a moment with slightly flushed cheeks, before bursting forth into a sweet plaintive melody, her voice as clear and pure as the chime of an Alpine bell.

Of graceful, symmetrical figure, which was clad in a flowing suit of white mulle, open slightly at the throat, her face was one of rare perfectness of feature and refined beauty.

A tender, dreamy eye of blue, a delicately health-tinted complexion, with a mouth of rare sweetness, none could see her but to admire

her. Her hair was arranged with taste, and indeed her whole appearance was elegant—captivating.

With bated breath the rough audience listened to the beautiful song, it seeming to hold them spell-bound. Even after Rienzo had courtesied and retired behind the wings, there was a dead silence for several minutes.

Then the babel of cheers and applause that burst forth shook the structure as though a tornado had struck it. Men yelled at the top of their voices, stamped on the floor, and even went so far as to hurl pouches of dust and golden coin in a storm upon the stage.

Two men seemed affected in a different way from the others. One was Beau Blonde, who had pushed excitedly forward to the stage, and stood eagerly awaiting the reappearance of the songstress, a wild expression upon his face.

The other was the man clad in buckskin. His face had assumed a deathly pallor, and he had followed at the gambler's heels, stern resolution in his glance.

Across the room, Little Bill Bethel stood erect upon the barrel, a revolver in his hand.

"See heer, Beau, what yer goin' ter do?" he shouted above the din. "Member I've got my hey on yer. That singer's my old pard, Kate, sure's preachin', an' ye offer to tech her or insult her, I'll blow a bug through yer noddle!"

Blonde flashed a withering glance at the youngster, but did not answer, and just then Rienzo made her second appearance.

In an instant the applause ceased and quiet was restored, and as she was about to sing again the voice of Little Bill piped:

"Look out thar, Kate, old gal—the blonde chap on the right means mischief!"

The singer gave the boy a startled stare, then turned a half-frightened glance at Beau Blonde, who at the same instant tossed a letter upon the stage.

She picked it up, and with pallid face turned and staggered behind the scenes.

As she did so the man in buckskin seized Beau Blonde by the throat!

"You infernal scoundrel!" he roared, in a stentorian voice, "what do you mean?"

CHAPTER IV.

THE DUEL.

THE man who stopped Denver Doll on the street was a genteel and prepossessing elderly gentleman, say about fifty years of age. He was rather portly, had a kindly expressioned face, with beard and hair streaked with gray and eyes that beamed with honest light.

Doll made this inventory of him at a glance, and resolved to hear him. But for his respectable appearance she would have repulsed him.

"Yes, I am Denver Doll," she replied, in answer to his question. "How came you to know?"

"I did not know—I merely suspected. I have heard you describe, and judged by your manner of dress, in male attire, that this might be you. You are a detective, I believe?"

"A sort of one, yes."

"A am glad. You are the very person I want. Are your services to be secured?"

"Well, that depends somewhat upon circumstances. What's the nature of the job?" Doll asked.

"You shall know, if you will just step down to my office with me. My daughter Bessie is there, and I will introduce you to her."

"All right. Lead ahead."

The gentleman obeyed.

On the way, he said abruptly:

"Oh! I quite forgot to introduce myself. My name is Harrison Ainsley."

"Indeed?" Doll said, and relapsed into silence.

The announcement evidently gave her considerable surprise, but as the gentleman did not appear to notice it, she kept her counsel.

They soon arrived at a strongly built log cabin, the windows of which were guarded by strong iron bars.

Over the heavy oaken door was suspended a sign, which read:

"HARRISON AINSLEY, BANKER."

Within, the walls were plastered, and everything was comfortable.

A long counter, guarded by a strong wire grating, divided off part of the room, behind which was an iron safe, writing desk, and chairs.

The other portion of the room was supplied with a couple of settees and a stove.

A young lady of about Doll's own age occupied a seat upon one of the settees—a very pretty, modest-looking young lady, too, neatly attired, and bearing evidences of refinement and good culture.

She arose as Mr. Ainsley introduced Doll, and bowed courteously, then all hands became seated.

"Well, you see," Mr. Ainsley began, after blowing his nose vigorously, "I'm in a much worked-up state over things that are happening to mar the peace and tranquillity of my life. You will observe that I am a banker and broker by profession, and I may add, that having been lucky in business transactions for several years, I have amassed a fortune of no mean proportions, but being a conscientious man, I have done so without fraud or dishonesty. But for a couple of months past I have been constantly robbed."

"Well?"

"I have kept the fact hushed up in my own family, in hopes of being able to personally detect the robber or robbers at their game, but all to no avail. I have at last come to the conclusion that it needs a sharper person than I to take hold of the case."

"In what manner has this robbery been perpetrated?"

"Well, that I cannot exactly tell you. It is always done during the night, but how, or by whom, is a mystery to me. You will observe that the cabin is very strongly built for the purpose for which it is occupied. The door is of unusual strength, and is nightly locked on the outside with padlocks—a dozen of them, no two alike. And I have never found any evidence of their having been picked or tampered with. The window bars are so fixed that they cannot be removed without cutting them, and the money is nightly locked in the safe. Yet every few nights a sum of from fifty to two hundred dollars is taken."

"Have you ever staid here over night?"

"On two occasions; but on both I fell asleep, and money was gone in the morning."

"Humph! Have you ever kept watch on the outside?"

"No. It is hardly safe for a man of my caliber to be abroad on the street all night. There are too many rougs hanging around, who are not particular how they get money as long as they get it."

"Do you personally place the money in the safe, nights?"

"Yes."

"How many persons to your knowledge are acquainted with the combination besides yourself?"

"None. My nephew, Ned, attends to nothing but my books."

"Is he temperate and reliable?"

"I have the greatest confidence in him."

"Confidence is often misplaced, you know. Who are the inmates of your household?"

"My daughter, myself, and a Chinese servant. Ned boards at a neighboring miner's house."

"Any other relatives?"

A pained expression flitted over the banker's face.

"Ay, I have. A scapegrace son, whom I have not seen for over two years, and never expect to see again."

"You have no idea of his whereabouts, then?"

"None whatever."

A silence followed.

Doll interpreted it that the Ainsleys did not desire to further divulge their family secrets.

"Well," she said, "if suspicion points to no one, I don't see much of a clew to work!"

"No, but you detectives ought to be able to pick up threads to work on. I would really like you to undertake the case, young lady, as I have heard much of your ability. I am losing money too fast to suit me, and I'll tell you what I'll do. If you'll discover the parties or party of this case, and bring them to justice, I'll give you a thousand dollars!"

"Very well. I will undertake the case. Are there any more points you have to offer?"

"Well, yes. There is one thing I have neglected to mention. Once or twice a week, lately, I have received through the post-office a letter, containing one of these curious cards, the meaning of which I cannot interpret, except the meaning be a menace."

He took from his pocket a card, the size of an ordinary business card, but tinted a light blue, on which was engraved a skull and cross-bones and coffin, and inscribed:

"S. D.

"BEWARE—COUNT THE DAYS—30."

Denver Doll looked at the strange card for a while, studiously, seeming to be in deep meditation.

"You are right. The notice is evidently meant to convey to you the warning that you are doomed, and will be killed, in thirty days. The party of desperadoes, (whom I am here after) that wrecked the train last night, employ the skull and cross-bones as a symbol, and are undoubtedly the authors of this card. They also may be connected with the bank robbery. I will look into the matter. If there is nothing more of importance, at present, I will take leave, and see you again."

She first gave the bank an examination, but could get nothing but what appeared permanent and solid.

After bidding the banker and his daughter good-night, she went forth on the street again.

"There's a nigger in the bush somewhere, and I will hunt a thousand's worth for the same, you bet," she mused. "I must see Mr. Ned Ainsley!"

To say that Beau Blonde was astounded by the sudden attack of the fierce but dashing stranger, would be drawing it mild.

He jerked loose from the grasp upon his collar, and wheeled around, his face flaming with rage incarnate.

"Curse you! what do you mean?" he gasped, hoarsely. "Who are you that durst lay a hand on me?"

"I am Pacific Phil, at your service, and the man that dare call any ruffian to account for insulting a woman!" the stranger retorted, grimly. "What was in that note you threw upon the stage, sir?"

"None of your business!" Beau Blonde roared, raising his clinched fist to strike his antagonist; but before he could do so he received a terrible blow in the face from Pacific Phil's fist, that knocked him back against the stage, insensible.

With a cool laugh, the scout turned to the gaping crowd, his eyes scintillating like diamonds.

"Tell the puppy he'll find me outside, if he's not satisfied," he said, dryly, and then pushed his way out through the crowd. A large part of the audience followed him, and some of them surrounded him, enthusiastically, while others stood aloof, with sullen faces.

These were evidently the cronies of the discomfited gambler, Beau Blonde.

"Ye did jest right, stranger," one miner declared, loudly, "and here's what kin lick ther socks off'n ther man as ses ye didn't. Ther fresh galoot hes wanted his nose thumped, for a long while."

Pacific Phil smiled quietly, but said nothing. He was evidently not sorry for his act.

"I say, boss, you are jest ther old creamery-de-la butter, you aire!" cried Little Bill, as he burst into the circle. "Dog my cats, ef you didn't sail in and save my old woman, Kate, like a storm o' horse chestnuts."

Pacific Phil gazed down at the lad, in wondering surprise.

"Who are you?" he demanded, curiously.

"Billiam Bethel, at yer service. Ther Rienzo w'at sung aire nothin' but ther long an' short o' my old side-pardner, Kate, you bet! She jest slung aside her pick an' pan, an' skipped out an' left her young prodigy a diggin' away. I skipped arter her, an' ef ye hadn't 'a' punched Beau Blonde's nose, I'd hev done it fer ye."

Pacific Phil seemed extremely surprised at the boy's words, and probably would have addressed him, had not at this instant a fierce yell emanated from the doorway of the theater.

The next instant Beau Blonde came rushing out, with the mien of a fury.

Straight up to the buckskin scout he strode, his face flaming with rage, and eyes gleaming.

"Look here, you black-hearted rascal, are you aware what you have done?" the gambler cried.

"Perfectly well!" Pacific Phil replied, not in the least disconcerted. "I thumped a puppy in the face, and will repeat the action, if you give me any provocation."

"You are a coward and a craven. You dare not fight as gentlemen fight!"

"There's where you mistake. That's just where you find me at home, with weapons. If you want to fight, all you've got to do is say so, and you shall be accommodated. I doubt if I ever saw a person I'd like to fight more, than you."

"Fight it shall be then!" Beau Blonde cried, fiercely. "You have insulted me, and I demand satisfaction. Revolvers shall be the

weapons, at twenty paces, and we are to fire until one or the other falls!"

"Clear the street!" Pacific Phil cried. "We will get down to business at once!"

The crowd parted to either side, and the two enemies took positions in the middle of the street twenty paces apart.

"Who will act as starter and referee?" the buckskin sport asked, looking around.

"I will!" Denver Doll said, stepping forward. "I'm quite handy at the business, thanks to experience!"

"An' I'll be ther buckskin's second!" Little Bill shouted, dancing with delight. "Reckon I'm just ther pigeon fer that. If either party tries any shennanigan, I'll send a bullet-doux right through his pericranium."

"That's the ticket!" Pacific Phil said, admiringly. "You've got an abundance of mouth, youngster, but I'm dashed if I don't believe you've got the sand to back it!"

"Bet your boots I have!" Billy declared, pompously. "I'm a skinner, I am, right from Hidetown."

"I'll second Beau Blonde!" a burly ruffian announced stepping forward. "This hyar has got to be a squar' go."

"Of course it has!" Denver Doll returned. "Get ready, gents. Turn your backs to each other. At the word three, wheel and fire!"

The opponents obeyed the order, in regard to position, by turning their backs to each other.

Pacific Phil held a fine revolver in his grasp—a self-cocker it was, silver-plated, with gold mountings, and diamond sights.

As cool as a cucumber, figuratively speaking, was the buckskin scout, his every expression denoting confidence that he would win.

Beau Blonde did not look so confident, but there was a dangerous gleam in his eye.

Little Bill Bethel seemed the best pleased of any in the crowd.

"Yere's yer high old polka-dot pic-nic!" he cried. "Yere's yer chance ter make a fortune bettin' on ther right hoss. Who wants to bet? Where's the feller? Go ye even up thet Blondy gits salivated fast lick. Whoopy! old buckskin knows his alfabet, you bet! He stuck in a flake ter save my old gal, Kate, w'ot callers nerself Rienzio, jest 'ca'se it sounds scrumpscious, an' I'll bet Beau, hyar, gits plugged."

No one, apparently, had any desire to bet on an uncertainty: no one could tell just how things would turn out.

One was as likely to win as the other.

"Ready!" cried Denver Doll.

"One!"

A minute's breathless suspense.

"Two!"

With bated breath the audience craned their necks forward.

"Three! Fire!"

As if mounted upon pivots, the opponents wheeled simultaneously, facing each other.

Then came two flashes—two falls.

Both men had been hit.

CHAPTER V.

THE WOMAN WHO FAINTED.

The two reports of the duelists' weapons had not come simultaneously.

The first report had come from the direction of the buckskin sport, while the second had come from the pistol of the card-sharp.

Beau Blonde had fallen first.

Pacific Phil fell rather mechanically, soon afterward, and both men lay in a half-reclining position in the street, with the moonlight streaming down upon them from the arched vault of the skies above them.

The rude audience stood for a moment speechless and motionless, as if undecided what to do; but when Beau Blonde fell back, apparently dead, the deputy marshal, who had been sent to Tagget Notch to investigate the train wreck, leaped first over to the gambler's side, and then approached the buckskin sport, followed by the excited crowd.

Pacific was bleeding from a wound in the side, and something of the ruddy brown of his cheeks had given way to a deathly pallor.

Deputy Marshal King gazed at the stricken scout a moment curiously, then said:

"Well, sir, I am sorry to see a man of your evident respectability in such a disgraceful row. It is my duty to arrest you for the crime of murder!"

Pacific looked surprised.

"How do you make that out?" he demanded, with an effort.

"In this wise," King replied. "Dueling is a reprehensible crime at best, and it is our duty to arrest all whom we find engaged in the prac-

tice. Besides this, you have as good as killed your opponent, and I must hold you, at least to await the result of his injuries."

"But I did not fire a shot!" Pacific Phil cried hotly. "Examine my revolver and you will see that every chamber is loaded."

And he flung the weapon upon the ground in front of Denver Doll, who hastily secured it.

King motioned to several of Beau Blonde's cronies, who instantly seized hold of the buckskin sport.

"Off with him to the lock-up!" the deputy ordered. "We'll have a little more law and order here while I'm in the town. Where's the gal as took the revolver?"

All looked around, but Denver Doll had slipped away.

She reappeared upon the street shortly after, however, and encountered the stern-visaged deputy.

"Hello! what did you do with that revolver?" he demanded, confronting her.

"Put it where it is safe until wanted, my friend," the girl retorted, coolly.

"Then you go straight and get it, or I'm dashed if I don't yank you into the jug!"

"Oh! I guess not!" Doll retorted, pulling back the collar of her jaunty coat, and exposing a gleaming badge of gold. "Kind o' opine that carries me through, not?"

The deputy started and stared.

"Oho!" he ejaculated. "So you're here after them train-robbers, in anticipation of a reward being offered, eh?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

"Waal, now, my maid in britches, jest let me tell you one thing: I'm here on that same lay myself, and I ain't goin' to hev no sekond party nosin' around in my way. Hark to that, will ye! The healthiest thing you can do is to strike out fer some more congenial climate. Mind, I make no threats, but a word to the wise is sufficient."

"Somehow, I never was very wise: so it's useless to try to bluff me!" Doll remarked. "By the way, I am not aware that a deputy-marshal has authority to interfere in the professional duties of a regular detective. No doubt a letter to the chief marshal would correct your freshness. Don't you think so?"

"You'll find out!" King gritted, turning and walking away.

"Nice man to have in a public office," Denver Doll muttered, as she sauntered along. "If I mistake not, he has got as black a heart as the rascals who infest this camp. Pacific Phil did not wound the gambler, for his revolver had not been fired. Beau Blonde must have enemies as well as friends here."

There was no more theater that night. The fight had, as a point of attraction, cast the beautiful Rienzio in the shade. It would have been hard to have tempted the crowd back into the Globe again had a hundred prima donnas held the board instead of one.

Immediately after going behind the scenes, the beautiful songstress hastily enveloped herself in a waterproof cloak, and left the building by a rear door.

In the dark shadows of the gulch she witnessed the result of the duel—saw Beau Blonde borne away to his shanty, and Pacific Phil to the strong cabin which served the purpose of a jail.

Then, with a stifled cry, she moved away through the darkness, without appearing to know or care whither she went.

"Oh! God, why did I come here?"

Again and again these words escaped her lips, and seemed to echo in the niches of the gulch wall and in the air above her.

Her eyes burned with a wild, unnatural fire; her face was deathly white, and she trembled violently.

She grew dizzy, and a sort of mist came before her eyes, still she reeled on for some distance, as if determined not to give up.

But it was no use.

At last she uttered a wild, despairing cry, and sunk to the ground in a dead swoon directly in front of the Ainsley residence.

Beau Blonde, although wounded, was not nearly so badly hurt as Deputy King had intimated.

He had received only a slight flesh wound, which did not disable him to any particular extent, and his exhibition of fainting was only a ruse, so that Pacific Phil would not fire at him.

After being borne to his shanty, he was laid upon a rude couch and his wound dressed. Then, after a copious draught of whisky, he declared himself all hunky once more.

Dismissing all, except one low-browed, vil-

lainous-looking fellow, whom he addressed as Nick, they held an inaudible conference.

Soon there was a rap at the door, and Nick admitted Deputy King.

The eyes of the wounded gambler lit up with a strange gleam at sight of the officer.

"Well?" he interrogated, grimly, "have you come to arrest me, too?"

"Hardly," King replied. "If I had wanted to do that, I should have done so at once. How are you feeling?"

"A little better. Is my enemy caged?"

"He is; and if I am any judge, he will remain so for one while."

"Why did you prefer to arrest him?"

"Because I believed I was nailing a notorious desperado, and am not convinced to the contrary. Then, too, it looked as if he fired first."

"Well, did he?"

"I am not certain yet. As far as I have learned, attention was on you, mostly, an' few if any saw any flash of his weapon. It may be that I can not handle him as your would-be murderer, but I reckon I can bring him to Limerick as Captain Crime, the ringleader of the Terrible Tribunal that wrecked the U. P. train."

"You don't say!"

"But I do! I have become pretty well satisfied that the nest of this beautiful flock of vultures is in this camp, and I've seen no one I'd sooner suspect of being Captain Crime than the fellow in buckskin."

"Maybe you're right. The fellow is a thoroughbred, that's evident, and I don't fancy the idea of his occupying the same town as I. If you can manage to get a noose around his neck, I'll pay you well for it."

"It's a bargain. As soon as a reward is offered, of sufficient dimensions, I fancy it will be no hard matter to bring proof against him."

"Of course not. Come to me and I can furnish you a goodly number of men who will swear just as you want them."

Later, after an earnest consultation, the two conspirators sealed the compact by indulging in several bumpers of "bug-juice," after which King took his departure.

Denver Doll had not done wrong in estimating him a rogue.

"Gimcracks and gum-fodder, but I'm glad to see you! Hain't I had a boss old skewrup, tho', in the time I've been separated from ye! Bet I have! Told ye I'd find the old gal here, I did! What ye think—I jest waltzed inter the theater an' who d'ye s'pose I found thar? Why, twig my nose, ef I didn't see my old gal, Kate, a-paradin' the stage, as natteral as life, with enuff duds and gew-gaws on, tew give a billy goat the consumpsing. Oh! but c'uld'n't she whoop'er-up inter ther key-west notes! She'd 'a' made a Comanche kick his lump o' bombosity wi' the rear end of his golden slipper!"

Thus rattled off Little Bill Bethel, as he and Denver Doll met, not long after the duel that had terminated in the arrest of Pacific Phil.

The two had met each other within a stone's throw of the office of Harrison Ainsley, and they naturally paused—more to exchange confidences perhaps, than for any other reason.

"If you could only master your tongue Billy, it would be ever so much better," Doll said reprovingly. "You have in you some of the elements of a detective, but I see I must curb you to the practice of not talking too loud, nor telling too much of what you know, when there are chances for other ears in your vicinity."

"Keerect, old gal! You've got more years nor I, and just you shove out the p'int, and I hope I'm a big-necked swan if I don't rope 'em in. We'll make a bossy old team, now, w'er we, and rogues won't have no more show than a hoss-fly on a Kernetticut saw-buck."

"You are right," the girl said, thinking best to humor him. "But, by the way, I've undertaken a job, and since my partner, Yakie, has forsaken me, I will take you in, in his place. There's a case of systematic robbery going on, and I've undertaken to ferret it out, and I may have a chance to work you in, to advantage."

"All right. Hyer's with ye tooth and toenail, until death do us bounce," less my gal Kate should freeze her bread-hooks onter me. Then I'd have to walk a bee-line, you bet! But, jest tell us what ye want and I'll tackle it, with all my feet."

"Well, come along back on this vacant lot, where that fallen tree is, and we will take a seat, and I will give you a few points relative to the case."

The move was made, and a moment later they were seated upon the body of the tree mentioned, from where they could have a view

of the Ainsley dwelling and the street, without being observed, themselves.

"You see that house," Doll said, after they were seated.

"Bet I do! Looks like a big-bug's pen, don't it?"

"As compared with the other shanties, yes. That's where Ainsley, the banker, lives. It's his case I've undertaken, in addition to that of hunting down the outlaws."

"Yes?"

"Well, you see that strong cabin, over yonder. That's the bank. Healthy looking bank ain't it, but nevertheless, it is a bank, where Ainsley stores his ducats, and carries on his business. He claims he is being mysteriously robbed, all the time, and yet can gain no clew to the perpetrator of the crime, and wants me to take hold of the job."

"Goin' to tackle it?"

"Yes, for there's good pay in it."

"Got yer skeleton to work on?"

"Partly. Haven't suspicioned any one direct, but have got my eye on Ainsley's nephew, Ned, who works in the bank, as book-keeper."

"Phew! ye don't let on! Why, I've met that feller, already, an' got acquainted. He were gittin' fleeced by that sharp Beau Blonde; so I jest sailed in an' won his money back for him."

"Ha! ha! So he is addicted to cards, eh? If that's the case, it may be no great trouble to find how the banker's stamps disappear. Don't you think so, William?"

"Nix-cum-a-roul!" the boy replied. "Tell ye that Ned Ainsley ain't no thief, no more'n I am. He's got a mug on him as honest looking as the face of an eight-day clock."

"Some faces are but natural masks to villainy," Doll observed, wisely. "I must see this fellow myself. By the way, have you kept an eye on the Dutchman?"

"Yes. He's slid out from the saloon an' evaporated. 'Spect he's gone whar he's got the young feller hid."

"Likely. Keep your eye peeled, and if you get a glimpse of him again, shadow him until you find the hiding place. Got any money?"

"Swads of it! I don't play keards fer nothin'." Went snucks with Ned Ainsley, ye see."

"Well, then, hunt yourself up a place to bunk, and I will do the same. To-morrow we will search deeper into this case."

"Sh! look!" Little Bill suddenly whispered, excitedly. "Who is that?"

A figure in a dark cloak had approached the Ainsley dwelling, and even as they looked, sunk down upon the steps.

"It's a woman!" Doll observed.

"Yes, and she has fainted too!" Bill declared. "Mebbe that's Kate—luks like her figger. Come! let's go over!"

"Stop!" Doll hissed, catching him by the arm, and detaining him. "Look! we'd better not interfere, now. See, she is being cared for."

Two men had emerged from the Ainsley dwelling, and raised the fainting woman and borne her within, whereupon the door was closed, and all was quiet in the vicinity.

Little Bill looked anxiously into Denver Doll's face, as if eager to gain her opinion of the proceeding, without asking.

"Humph!" the young Detective Queen muttered. "What are you staring at, Billy?"

"Tryin' to ketch yer idea of the matter," the boy replied.

"Why, what do you mean?"

"Nothin', maybe, but wasn't that kinder showrious, them two galoots a-comin' out and snatchin' the woman inter the house?"

"Well, I don't know. She will probably come out again, after she is restored."

"Maybel!" Bill assented, but there was a doubtfulness to his tone that told he didn't believe it. "Tell ye what I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' to hang around till I see her come out. If that's my gal Kate, and they keep her shut up in there, dash me if I don't fire the shebang!"

"Oh! pshaw! you're looney, Billy. It isn't at all likely the woman was the one you call your Kate. And if it was, what could a little pigmy like you do toward rescuing her?"

"Lots, you bet! Can't tell how fur a toad kin jump, by ther looks o' him, nohow. I'm goin' to watch!"

"Well, do as ye like about that. I'm goin' to look out for a bite of sleep. If you need assistance, you'll find me at the Mountain View shebang."

"Keereet! Sail away, Doxy! I'm in fer a little detective business on my own hook."

Denver Doll laughingly took her departure, leaving her young acquaintance to his proposed no-turnal watch over the Ainsley mansion.

A plucky piece of human mechanism was Lit-

tle Bill, and you could no more scare him than you could intimidate a raging lion.

So he stretched himself out on the log, and kept his eye upon the dwelling of Harrison Ainsley.

"Bet a cookie that was Kate. She's actin' up right strange, fer a sensible gal, o' late. Them two fellers, Beau Blonde and Pacific Phil, seemed to know her, an' I opine she know'd 'em, too. Then, hyer she comes along, an' faints on the banker's doorstep, and two men nearly snatch her bald-headed, a-gittin' her inter the house. Hello!"

The door of the Ainsley residence opened, and the banker himself came forth, and made his way to the jail.

"Struck a lead, I'm a shad, ef I hain't!" Little Bill chuckled.

CHAPTER VI.

BILLY'S FIRST CASE.

As before stated, Harrison Ainsley, on leaving his house, directed his footsteps toward the jail or strong cabin, where Pacific Phil had been incarcerated after the du 1; but before he could reach that edifice of justice, he suddenly discovered that he was dogged, and turned sharply around to behold Little Bill Bethel but a few paces away.

"Hello! you young imp, what you mean by following me?" the banker demanded, angrily.

"Reckon a feller has a right to walk in whichever direction he pleases!" Bill retorted, impudently. "Sides that, I'se spottin' you, I aire."

"Spotting me? Why, bless my eyes, what nonsense is this? What are you spotting me for?"

"'Ca'se I'se a detective, I is, an' you're a 'spicious kerricter. Whar's my gal, Kate?"

The boy's eyes keenly rested on the banker's face, but failed to notice any particular effect produced by his words.

"What do you suppose I know about your Kate, sir? Begone, now, or I'll give you the toe of my boot!"

"Ba-a-a! You can't ketch me," grinned Bill. "I can out run a garter snake, or a streak of greased lightning. Besides that, I can shute a wart off'm the nose of a cricket!"

"Well, I shall certainly shoot you, if you dog me any further!" the banker warned, as he turned away.

Little Bill followed, however, although it was at a somewhat safer distance, where Ainsley could not hear or see him.

The banker soon came to the front of the jail, where a couple of well armed roughs had been stationed by Deputy King.

"Well, boys, are you keeping the fellow safe?" he asked.

"Bet we aire! He's got to tread over two dead bodies, 'fore he kin pass hyer," one declared, grimly.

"That's the way to talk! I reckon he'll be lynched to-morrow. I'll go inside, and prepare him to meet his doom."

"Oh! no ye don't! Ther boss guv us orders not to admit any one, under any pretext, an' we obey ther boss," the guard growled.

"Who is the boss, pray?"

"Ther deputy."

"Pshaw! he ain't the earth. Come! open up, and let me in!"

"Nary, pard!"

"Nonsense. You know I am one of the responsible men of the place."

"Don't matter ef you war ther president—'twould be jest the same."

Ainsley uttered an anathema. He had not expected to meet with this sort of resistance. Then, too, he evidently had some strong reason for wishing to interview the prisoner.

"See here!" he exclaimed, after a moment's of thought, "you fellows don't find a ten-dollar gold-piece hanging on every bush. Here is a couple. Do you want them?"

The two guards exchanged glances, and then held a consultation, inaudible to the banker.

Finally the spokesman turned and held out his hand.

"Give us yer swag. You'll be responsible thet he don't escape while we slip over and get a drink o' bad habit?"

"Of course!"

The money exchanged hands, and the door was unlocked; then, while the banker entered the jail, the two roughs made off for the nearest saloon to liquor up.

Knowing Pacific was chained to the wall, Ainsley did not think it worth while to close the door after him.

In consequence, the liliputian figure of Little Bill was in the jail almost as soon as the banker

himself, although the latter had no suspicion of his presence, as William took good care to secrete himself behind the door, which swung inward.

A moment later Ainsley produced a bull's-eye lantern and removed the cap, when a stream of light fell upon the prisoner, who was partly reclining upon the floor.

He did not seem surprised when he saw the banker; his features did not change in expression, but a steely glitter entered his eyes.

"Well! well!" the banker said. "So you have come back, have you, Philip?"

"Perhaps," the other replied, dryly. "You have eyes, I dare say."

"So I have. What brings you back here?"

"I do not as a rule make known my business to any one. You may infer, however, tha I came for a purpose."

"Oh, very naturally I should presume that. Enmity to your father, if nothing more, would furnish an incentive for you to return."

Pacific Phil laughed sarcastically.

"Why should I not be your enemy?" he demanded. "A few years ago did you not forbid me to ever again set foot within your door—even refused to let me see my mother when she was dying? I was a boy then—I am a man now."

"But powerless all the same. You should know better than to rebel against me."

"Who are you, pray? What are you but an infamous rascal? Shall I tell you what you disowned me for, you accursed wretch of a father? Shall I tell you?"

"Oh, I can save you the trouble. It was because you wedded against my will the daughter of my greatest enemy."

"Exactly, you devil! It was because you had advice that she would, by possession of certain papers, come into a handsome fortune on arriving of age. I never knew this till afterward. My wife then informed me that you—my father and the husband of a faithful wife—had been paying her lovely attentions, and had used your utmost endeavors to persuade her to elope with you. My mother was rapidly sinking away with consumption, and you, heartless wretch, were paving the way for another wife and a fortune!"

Harrison Ainsley's face had grown whiter and his manner nervous.

"Why bother your head with such nonsense? You know full well that every word of it is false."

"You lie! 'tis true. Not satisfied with turning me out of house and home, you hired an adventuress to enter our home, and, armed with a forged marriage certificate, to charge me with bigamy. What was the result? The evidence was so conclusive against me that our happy home was broken up, and my wife left me to the wild, reckless life of a—well, not quite a ruffian. A sport would perhaps be the better term. Do you wonder, Harrison Ainsley, that I am your enemy?"

"I neither wonder, nor am I concerned at the matter. A man is liable to make a mis-move, once in a while!" the banker chuckled. "By the way, my son, did the child come into the fortune you have reference to?"

Pacific Phil fairly ground his teeth with rage. "I'd choke you for asking that, were I free!" he gritted. "You know full well she did not, when you held the papers. But, it is not too late for reparation yet, perhaps. The adventuress is dead, I have learned—"

"But I hold the certificate. Ha! ha! you had better have stayed away from Nugget Notch, Philip. You'll find poor sympathy here."

"It is something I do not live on. Once I get out of here, I think it will be my turn to do something retributive."

"When you get out—exactly. That is speaking rather uncertainly. By the way, where is your wife?"

"That, of course, I would never tell you did I know!"

The words were spoken with intense bitterness.

A faint glitter in the banker's eyes seemed to indicate that he was not exceedingly disappointed, at the answer he had received.

"Well, we will not bandy words," he said. "I simply came to learn what your intention were toward me, so I should know how to act. You are doubtless aware that I married a second time, and my wife is dead. Her beautiful daughter resides with me, and if you care to settle down and marry her, I'll get you out of this scrape; otherwise, it is not impossible that you may be taken for Captain Crime, the noted desperado, and be lynched. They do say you look wonderfully like him."

"Thanks for your offer. I am a man, not a tool. If I am lynched, remember you have another enemy to fear, more desperate than I—Rudolph Conroy."

"Bah! the man is dead."

"By no means. Although through abject fear of him, you had him walled up in a mountain, he still lives, a free man, with an oath registered to get even with you."

"I do not believe you; nevertheless, let him come; I will be prepared for him. Good by! Expect to see you dangling to a limb, when I arise, to-morrow morning," and he capped his lantern again as he turned to depart.

Behind the door crouched Little Bill Bethel, in a quandary.

What should he do?

Should he scoot out, or he locked in, with the prisoner?

There was no time, that was certain, for meditation.

"I'll scoot, and run the risk of results!" and he dodged out of the door, just in the nick of time to escape discovery, by the returning guards.

"Here's a go," he mused, skulking off into the darkness. "Collared a case against the very nob wot Denver Doll is working for. 'Thar's no use talkin'. I've got ter big a load o' knowledge on my stomache. I must transfer sum of et fer Dollbaby to dissect."

With his young brain in a whirl of excitement, he hurried away toward the Mountain View, the only place in Nugget Notch with any pretensions to being a hotel.

"Tan my jacket if I ain't a blossomer—a regular fast class skin-peeler of a detective, in no time! An' it's a rum old case. That aire Percifick Phil is separated from his right bower. He rekernised my gal Kate at the theater. Then thar's the money-shaver, he's scooped Kate in, off 'm the street. Why, drat it, don't thet look like as if Percifick an' Kate used ter be in harness? Wonder ef I'm their progeny? Kate never sed I was hern, more'n she used ter whale me in motherly fashion. By ginger, I'm goin' ter figger in a claim, ef thar's sech a thing in ther dixyunary, an' no mistake."

In the mean time, Denver Doll had once more dropped into one of the principal gaming saloons, before going to the hotel, in hopes of finding her Teutonic pard, Yakie Strauss.

The saloons of Nugget Notch kept open all night, and there was ever a large crowd of devotees to the fascinating poker.

The card tables were mostly full, so Doll strolled about the large apartment, taking an inventory of those present.

Among those who particularly attracted her attention, was a tall, brawny man of commanding presence, who was probably some fifty years of age, for his heavy beard and bushy hair were deeply streaked with gray.

He was not unprepossessing of countenance, had a keen, piercing black eye, and was well dressed, wearing a silk hat upon his head.

Doll gave him only a passing glance, but was conscious that his gaze followed her wherever she went.

At one table she found a young man seated, with his head resting upon one hand, and a dull, weary expression in his eyes.

Quick to form opinions, she concluded that this was Mr. Edward Ainsley, the banker's nephew.

At first she hesitated to speak to him. But, after a few minutes she summoned up courage, and paused by his table.

"Excuse me," she said, "but am I not addressing Mr. Ned Ainsley?"

He looked up at her inquiringly.

"That's my name," he answered, politely raising his hat. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Well, yes—that is, I've a few questions to ask in regard to a certain subject. I am Denver Doll, detective."

His surprise seemed to increase, at this announcement.

"Ah! I am happy to meet you. Your profession is one I have always rather admired. If there is anything I can do for you, command me."

"Thank you. I won't detain you long. You see it's a little private matter I have undertaken to solve. You work for Harrison Ainsley?"

"I do."

"In what capacity?"

"As bookkeeper and secretary."

"He does a very snug business?"

"Quite a large one, ma'am."

"Do you have the handling of any of the cash?"

"None."

"You reside with Mr. Ainsley?"

"I do not. I room at a miner's shanty, and take meals at the hotel below here."

"Why do you not reside with them?"

"Oh! I prefer privacy."

"How long have you worked here?"

"Since I came—a year ago."

"Acquainted with Mr. Ainsley's daughter, Miss Bessie?"

"His step-daughter, you mean. Yes; I am well acquainted with her."

"Has she other company?"

"None to my knowledge."

"Do you understand the combination of Mr. Ainsley's safe?"

"I do not. What are you driving at, may I ask?"

"I will answer by asking another question. Are you aware that from time to time, lately, sums of money of various amounts, have been removed from the bank, during the night-time?"

"Indeed I am not!" Ned exclaimed excitedly. "Uncle never said anything to me about it. Am I suspected, for heaven's sake?"

"Not by your uncle, I fancy. He spoke in good terms of you, but appeared to be greatly mystified."

"Well, I should say so. He has been very mum, at least. Do you suspect me?"

"It is my privilege to suspect every one until I hit on the right one," Doll answered, with one of her pretty smiles. "It isn't so nice to be a detective as it may seem. One has often to be rude or insolent. I hope you are not the culprit, Mr. Ainsley; you seem like a nice young fellow."

"Thanks for the compliment, but I assure you I am not the person you seek."

"I hope not. By the way, what salary do you receive?"

"Forty dollars a week."

"Oh! well, that ought to keep you in change, nicely."

"It does, though I sometimes blow a large part of it in at the table; but I always manage to keep my head above water."

"Well, I'll look around and see who else to investigate," Doll said, with a pleasant laugh.

Then she left the place and went over to the hotel, on the steps of which she found her diminutive protegee, Little Bill Bethel, his eyes literally as big as saucers.

"Oh! Jemima Crima, Dollbaby!" he gasped. "I've struck a lead—a regular old bonanza, or I'm an ant-eater."

CHAPTER VII.

NAILING A NOTE.

SEEING that a considerable crowd of open-mouthed idlers were in the vicinity, Denver Doll hastily hurried Little Bill to her room, where he gave a remarkably clear and concise narration of what he had seen and heard, together with his individual opinion on the matter.

The Detective Queen's surprise was great, and she was silent for some time, in deep meditation.

"I hardly took Harrison Ainsley to be a man of this type," she admitted, finally. "He appeared to me like a thorough gentleman."

"He didn't to me, tho'," Bill retorted, doubling up his little fists. "He threatened to set me up in the boot business, free gratis. That's why I snucked arter him. Allus 'spicious o' men who aire afeared o' kids like me. But, I tell ye, Dollbaby, suthin's got ter be done. The banker may feel uneasy 'bout hev'in' my gal Kate shet up in his own house, and may be snuckin' her off ter sun safer place, even now."

"Possibly, unless Ainsley may wish to keep her here for a certain purpose, which I should infer, —if, indeed, he has her shut up at all. As for the prisoner in the jail, I do not apprehend any trouble in his direction during the night, as all seems quiet; so our best move is to snatch a morsel of sleep during the remainder, so as to be fresh for duty in the morning. To-morrow is likely to bring about new events."

The idea was acted upon, and our two friends threw themselves upon the bed, and Little Bill's hearty snores soon proclaimed him to be asleep.

Denver Doll laid awake for some time, however, her active mind reviewing the situation.

"There seems no two ways about it, but what Harrison Ainsley is an unparalleled villain," she concluded. "If she, his son's wife, is to come into a fortune, and he holds the necessary papers, that accounts for his housing her. He then intends to make a summary disposal of his own son, and in order to do it, will undoubtedly try to make him out Captain Crime, Chief of the Skull and Cross-bones League, known as the Terribles. I fear he can do this unless sufficient

testimony can be produced against him to make the charge a falsehood. That may be a hard matter. As for handsome Ned Ainsley's being the robber in the bank case, I am satisfied he is not guilty. I must next suspect the banker's step-daughter, whom he introduced to me as his daughter."

Morning at last dawned, rainy, cold and disagreeable—such a day as suspended work at the placer mines, though the quartz drifts were worked as usual.

After breakfast, Denver Doll left Little Bill to look after himself, while she strolled down to the post-office.

Behind the counter she beheld the postmaster doing up some mails; so she confronted him, after the customer had gone.

"Mosby, I know you," she said, positively, one hand resting on a revolver butt.

He started, and stared at her a moment, and then uttered a growl of recognition.

"Well?" he hissed, his bloodshot eyes gleaming.

"It is well, Mosby," the girl replied. "I'm not after you—there's no money in it. But I want some information!"

His manner changed instantly.

"Why on course, gal! Anything I kin do, ax of me. Jest come behind here, and sit down."

And he led the way behind the tier of postal boxes into a small apartment where the mail was made up or distributed.

"Now spiel out!" he said, lighting a pipe, and stroking his shaggy beard. "What d'ye want?"

"Oh! I'm working up a case. Want a pointer or so, you know. Does Miss Bessie Ainsley receive letters through this office?"

"She do."

"Often?"

"Every day or two."

"Are they from out of town?"

"Nix! Allus pick 'em out o' the drop letter-box."

"The next letter that comes for her I want! Do you hear?"

"Kerect! Can't 'ford to go back on you!"

"You bet you can't! By the way, you are pretty well acquainted with the rogue element. Who is there about town who might be Captain Crime?"

"Dunno."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"You bet—to my sorrow!"

"Is the fellow down in the jail the man?"

"Humph! no!"

"Would you swear to it?"

"Bet yer boots!"

"Good! That's all. Don't forget the letter."

"Nary time."

Doll then left the post-office, her brows slightly knitted, a habit with her when she was perplexed.

"I haven't done so badly, anyhow," she mused. "I may learn a bit by the letter."

Further along she met Harrison Ainsley, who approached excitedly.

"By heaven, I have been robbed again!" he cried, angrily. "The bank was entered again last night, and a hundred dollars extracted from the safe. This is unbearable."

Doll was silent a moment, a more puzzled expression upon her pretty face than before.

"Well, this beats me!" she averred. "Did you leave everything ship-shape?"

"Ay! I took unusual precautions."

"Was any of the money marked?"

"One ten-dollar note had a little red x in the lower left-hand corner of the face side of the note."

"A mark often employed, therefore of little account. Didn't take the numbers?"

"No."

"Do so hereafter. I fancy I am hot upon the right trail, but can tell you nothing definite yet. Will see you again."

They parted. Doll rambling about town, with an eye open to business.

In the course of her perambulations she came to the Ainsley mansion. Bessie was standing in the doorway, and instantly recognized the Detective Queen.

"Why, good-morning," she called out, smiling. "Won't you come in? It's so lonesome for poor me without company."

Secretly elated, Doll was not slow to accept the invitation, and the two girls were soon seated in the cosily-furnished parlor of the banker's residence.

Then followed an hour of purely feminine chatter. Then Doll was invited to take a look through the place, which she accepted, by saying:

"Thank you! I do so like to look all through other people's houses, for I expect to have one

of my own, and like to catch up ideas of how to arrange it."

To herself she said:

"Now, I'll see for myself, if there is a prisoner in the shebang."

They did the ground floor first, in all departments; then the cellar, where Bessie treated her guest to a sip of wine: then the up-stairs was visited, Denver Doll's sharp eyes noting every point and peculiarity.

And a feeling of disappointment came over her, after the last apartment had been visited, and no prisoner discovered.

"Maybe it's only a put-up job to throw me off track, though," flashed across her mind.

They returned to the parlor, and resumed conversation.

"Have you many gentleman acquaintances?" Doll asked, casually.

"None very intimate. It is papa's wish that I do not form many here."

And as she spoke, she raised her left hand, and arranged her frizzes.

At which Doll gave a violent start, unnoticed by the other.

She saw upon the engagement finger of the banker's step daughter, a peculiar ring—the same that had attracted her attention, when she was a prisoner in the camp of Captain Crime.

There could be no doubt of this in her mind—it was the same large brilliant diamond, in the curious hand-shaped setting of gold.

For a moment she was undecided what to say or do, for the thought was flashing through her mind—"where did the banker's daughter get possession of the ring, except through the agency of the chief of the Terrible Tribunal, or one of his men?"

After she had fully recovered from her surprise, which had caused an awkward lull in their conversation, she said:

"That is a very curious and pretty ring you wear?"

"Isn't it?" Bessie replied, with rather a nervous glance at the inquirer. "I think ever so much of it!"

"A present from a friend, I suppose?"

"Yes—to my mother, many years ago. It is a sort of heirloom in our family."

"That's a lie!" Doll inwardly commented.

"Ah! my pensive maiden, you may be very demure and modest, but you are very sly and fox like, nevertheless. I think I've stirred up a root of a subsequent development, in this visit. I'll tackle you in a new way, and then take leave. It's not practicable to rush matters, too fast."

After little more desultory conversation, Doll arose:

"Well, I guess I must be going," she announced, with a smile. "By the way, do you happen to have change for a hundred dollar note, with you? It is so hard to get a large bill broken."

"Indeed, I haven't. Papa could surely accommodate you, at the bank," was the reply.

"And so could you, Miss Minx, if you have not passed your money over to a confederate," was Doll's thought, as she took leave. "You'll bear watching."

During their interview, in referring to the robbery, Bessie had said:

"How strange that no one can be suspicioned! It worries papa greatly, and I am sure it would prove a great relief to us all, to have the mystery solved. I fancy sometimes the culprit must really be my cousin Ned—don't it seem so to you?"

Doll had replied, undecidedly.

Once to herself, the thought came to her:

"If that girl is guilty, and has confederates, will she not seek to avert suspicion by implicating Ned? I'll stake my life on it, he's not guilty. He stood my cross-questioning too well?"

Dropping into the place where she had met Ned Ainsley the night previous, she was surprised to find him there still, instead of at the bank.

His position was something the same as at their previous meeting, and his face wore rather a despondent expression.

"Hello!" Doll exclaimed, cheerfully, dropping into a chair, across the table. "What's the matter? Why are you not at the bank?"

Ned smiled faintly.

"Oh! I'm suspended, until this mystery is solved. He thought it would be best."

"He should have consulted me. This action may put the real culprits on guard, which would throw suspicion on you."

"I see!" Ned nodded, dubiously. "I had no choice, you know, but to stay away."

"Of course. Let it pass. By the way, have you change for a hundred-dollar note?"

Without hesitation he took a roll of money from his pocket, and gave her ten ten-dollar notes, receiving in return a crisp hundred-dollar greenback.

Doll examined the bills carefully; then, selecting one from the lot, tore it into fragments.

Ned uttered an ejaculation of astonishment.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded.

"Because it was one of the notes stolen from the bank last night!"

He turned very white.

"My God! Then you believe me the thief?"

"Some would—I do not. But I want you to tell me where you got the money?"

Ned took out the roll of bills, and extracted a fifty.

"The balance I won on faro," he said. "After leaving you, I played, and won, and lost, all night, at Red Mike's. It would be hard to tell where the bill came from, as the dealer held the money he took in, in his fist, all the time. Usually ten dollars' worth of ivories were bought of him at a time by each of the five playing, and when a twenty note was given him, he of course handed back a ten."

"I am glad you explain so frankly, and that I tapped that note before it got further. I am satisfied of your honesty, and am going to snare the guilty person before long!"

"Thank you! thank you for your confidence in me!" the young man said, seizing her hand, and raising it to his lips. "Honor I hold sacred, and I now know they cannot steal it from me, with such an invincible advocate as you!"

"Do not be too sure. Watch your actions, and don't get tripped. Look at your money, too?"

She then arose and departed, followed by his admiring glance, for he felt he had met the only woman he could ever afterward care for.

On her way to the hotel, she stepped into the doorway of the post-office, but a shake of Mosby's head caused her to go on her way.

As she was about entering the hotel, the gray-bearded man she had met before came out and tipped his hat politely.

"Wonder who he is?" Doll mused. "Somehow it strikes me his business, here in Nugget Notch, is of some importance."

She went up-stairs and traversed the hallway leading to her room.

As she was passing the door of the room adjoining her own, a slip of paper partly protruding from under the door, attracted her attention.

At first she was about to pass it by, but on second thought changed her mind, and procured it.

Without pausing she went on to her room, where she examined it.

It ran as follows:

".....! meeting to-night at M——'s, at usual hour. Important business. Don't fail to be there. "C. C."

That was all, but its significance, to Doll, was great.

"The six dots means number six," she interpreted. "The C. C. stands for Captain Crime—that's plain as pie. The whole thing summed up means that there's going to be a meeting of the Terrible Tribunal, at M——'s, wherever that may be—"

Just then the door was burst open, and Little Bill came tumbling end over end into the room, shrieking with laughter.

He landed upon his back on the floor, where he rolled and kicked and roared, until Doll was forced to laugh, too!

"Stop! stop, you young rattlepate! What are you raising such a racket about?" she demanded, shaking him, vigorously.

But the more she shook him, the harder he laughed, until it seemed as if his puny frame could not withstand the strain upon it.

Finally he found relief in words:

"Oh! Jerusalem! Oh! Holy Moses in the bullrushes! stop me! choke me! I shall kersplode. Oh! Oh! Ouch—ah!"

By this time the hall was filled with curious people, who crowded forward to see what was the matter.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLOTTING.

ABOUT the same time that Little Bill was taken with his paroxysm of laughter, Harrison Ainsley sat upon the settee in the public part of his banking office, engaged in a deep reverie, apparently, for his gaze was fixed upon the floor, and his brows were knitted in perplexity.

"There are no two ways about it. I must send for Felice. She served me once for money,

and she would no doubt be glad to do the same. They live a sort of miserable existence, after squandering the other money—up in the mountains somewhere, I believe. No doubt it suits the old man well enough, but the girl has an inherent craving for money, to put her on an equal footing with some of her more fashionable sisters—that's what has knocked in head what-ever scruples may have been born in her. I hardly know exactly what use I should put her to were she here, still, I fancy I could utilize her, for something tells me I may need some one eminently trusty to work for me by and by. Somehow, I don't put any too much confidence in the female ferret, Denver Doll. She has 'most too sharp eyes and wits, and would just as quick work up a case against me as any one else. If Felice were here, I could trust her—that is, I am pretty certain I could. To be sure she went off in kind of a huff, because I would not make love to her. But glittering gold is what causes her dusky eyes to sparkle. If Philip should get free, I should need her more than ever, for I think he knows that Kate and the singer were one and the same, and should he escape and not find her, he would raise the earth but what he would discover her whereabouts! Ha! ha! I think she is safe, and am satisfied no one knows anything in regard to her disappearance."

"Ye do, hey?"

Ainsley looked up with a startled cry.

The door was open, and a man stood upon the threshold—a burly, ragged, uncouth, be-whiskered mountaineer, with blood shot eyes, and an expression of countenance that was anything but pretty.

"Ye do, hey?" he grunted, advancing into the office. "Waal, mebbe ye do, but hyar is what would like to know whar she is—d'ye heer? Whar's Felice?"

"Oh! it's you, is it, Falqueer? Didn't know you at first. The devil's always near at hand when you're talking about him, they say."

"Thet hain't w'ot I axed ye?" Falqueer growled. "I cum down hyar arter Felice, w'ot run away ag'in, an' I jest want her."

"Why, man, I haven't seen her for several years!"

"Ye lie, durn ye. I jest heerd ye mention her name. Better not fool wi' me, Ainsley; ye know I never did hev a good name in church society."

"So I am aware. But sit down; I was just wishing Felice here, as I have some more work for her. You know I paid her well before."

"Bah! dang it, ye got yer job done dirt cheap. Ye didn't use her right. Ye orter married her, and sot me up in bizness."

The banker laughed.

"That would have been nice, wouldn't it? But I wasn't a fool," he retorted.

"Nuther was she. She never got over the slight. Ye couldn't git her now, nohow, 'cause why, she's spered religion!"

Ainsley laughed aloud.

"What nonsense!"

"Nary! She got it bad. She sed she'd did wrong, an' was comin' heer to make you hump fer it. Thet's ther kind o' religion Felice hez."

"A new species, I should say."

"You'll think so. An' now, I want you to pan her out."

"I haven't got her, nor even have seen her!"

"Look out! Mind, ef I ketch ye lyin' I'll slit yer jugular!"

"I don't lie."

"Queer. She started furst."

"Maybe she got smashed up in the accident on the U. P.?"

"Don't believe a word of it. She was allus too 'feard o' keers, war Felice."

"Well, be that as it may, I reiterate once more, and for the last, that I haven't the slightest idea where your daughter is; so let that settle it, and bother me no more."

"Won't I?" Falqueer sneered doggedly. "I'll jest kinder keep a watch on ye till I find whar Felice is!" He might have added, "Because I am aware that you have got a woman hidden away in captivity somewhere."

Then, with a hitch at his corduroy breeches, he turned and made his departure.

"May the devil take that fellow!" the banker growled savagely when he was gone. "Something tells me that he will yet make me trouble. He is an ugly customer at best, and I could well wish him out of the way."

The dawn of the new day had brought a revived interest throughout Nugget Notch concerning the late railroad accident.

When the miners and citizens straggled forth upon the street in the morning, placards were

found posted about, in conspicuous places, containing the following notice:

"\$1,000 REWARD!

"The above sum will be paid by Detective Sinclair, of the U. P. Railway, for the detection and arrest of the noted desperado, Captain Crime, or his band of outlaws.

"These men are known to have wrecked the U. P. train, on the night of the — inst., hence the reward. A liberal reward, also, for information leading to the discovery of their rendezvous.

"E. H. SINCLAIR, Detective.

"Mountain View Hotel."

It chanced that Denver Doll had not seen any of these notices during her morning trip.

But others had—among them, Beau Blonde and Deputy Marshal King, who were out together.

"Ah! just what we've been waiting for," King exclaimed, as he perused the notice. "I now have a chance to make a season's salary by working up a case on this Pacific Phil. Are you with me, Blonde?"

"That depends upon circumstances," the gambler replied. "Are you going to lynch him?"

"No; it wouldn't hardly do—especially since there's so much detective element in the town. This man Sinclair has a blamed sight of influence with the marshal, you see, and I can't very well act all my own way when he's around. Therefore, I'll see him personally and arrange a trial, to which you will send forward three witnesses to testify that they have seen Captain Crime, and that Pacific Phil is one and the same man. See?"

"See? Of course. I'm not blind or dumb."

"Well, then, it's settled. After Pacific Phil is stretched, you are to hand over to me one thousand dollars."

Beau Blonde hesitated.

"That's too much to give for the sake of gratifying one's spite," he protested.

"No matter. You agreed to it once. If you back out now, I'll throw up the whole business."

"Oh! well, go ahead then, and I will be as good as my word."

"It's a bargain. I'll off to call on the U. P.'s man now, and see what can be done with him."

He found Detective Sinclair in a room of the Mountain View, engaged in writing a letter, which, however, was laid aside on the detective's entrance.

"Mr. Sinclair, I believe," King said, on entering, and beholding a little, pinched-up, sawn-skinned, ferret-eyed individual, of some fifty years of age.

"Exactly, sir—Elias Sinclair, at your service. Who are you?" was the brusque answer.

"I am Deputy Marshal King," the other replied, seating himself.

"Eh? is that so?" and the puny man adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles and took a good look at his visitor. "Yes, I guess you are right. Believe I have seen you somewhere. What do you want, sir? I am very busy."

King scowled faintly. He had rather anticipated a more cordial reception, and was not a little disappointed.

"Well, I'll tell you," he answered, after a moment's pause. "I see you have offered a reward for the arrest of Captain Crime, the desperado. Fork over your stamps, and I can produce your man within ten minutes."

Sinclair looked at him doubtfully.

"If you have the power to produce the man, it is your duty as a deputy marshal to do so."

"I don't agree with you in such a case as this. In behalf of a corporation you offer a reward for a culprit. If I am lucky enough to discover him, the reward is mine. In the same respect, you get a reward for bringing the culprit to justice, through the instrumentality of another."

The eyes of the U. P. detective smiled, gleamingly.

"You have evidently been waiting for this reward," he observed.

"That is not yet proven. I have been here but a few hours."

"Well, where is your man?"

"Humph! Where is your cash?"

"Where it is likely to remain until I have the genuine offender in my possession. I do not propose to leave the vicinity until I am satisfied I have the right man."

"You do not suppose I would trick you, Sinclair?"

"I suppose nothing. I know nothing of you. A thousand dollars is a mountain to some men's eyes."

"Humph! Well, I can produce the genuine case if I choose. Now, if I bring the man to

public trial, and prove to you that he is without doubt the person you advertise for—"

"The reward is yours, in hand."

"The hanging will then take place at once?"

"As soon as I can take the man to the nearest legal court and have him tried."

"But one trial is sufficient. He must be tried and hung in Nugget Notch. The excited populace would never allow him to be taken out of town."

"Bah! you surmise a great deal. And, too, you seem to manifest extraordinary interest in the man's death."

"Why shouldn't I?" King demanded, tragically. "Hasn't he robbed me of money repeatedly? I have no mercy for a robber."

"Of course, I cannot say about that," the other replied, dryly. "If you can prove you have the genuine criminal I advertise for, so be it. If you cannot, you had better subdue your eager desire for the money."

"I can prove it. I have the fellow in jail now. Within two hours I can produce plenty of witnesses to swear that Pacific Phil, as he calls himself, is Captain Crime, the outlaw."

"Very well!" Sinclair replied, quietly, drawing his unfinished letter in front of him. "That will do. Order the trial for three o'clock this afternoon, in front of the jail."

As he began writing then, the deputy considered himself dismissed, and took his departure, with an expression of triumph upon his face.

Within an hour the camp was shaken to its center, as it were, with the report that Pacific Phil was accused of being Captain Crime, the desperado, and would be tried for causing the railway holocaust at Devil's Curve.

As soon as possible, Denver Doll cleared her room of the gaping crowd, and locked the door.

Then, with another attempt, she finally succeeded in bringing Little Bill out of his fit of laughter in a state of serenity.

Partly opening the door, she perceived that the crowd had dispersed, then turned to Bill.

"Now, Mr. William, I want you to explain yourself," she said, sternly. "Why, would you believe it, you've actually had the whole house aroused by your screeching."

"Couldn't help it, sis—had ter laff—feel jest like 'splodin' ag'in!"

"Don't you do it for the life of you, but tell me what on earth ails you!"

"Well, ye see, this was jes' how it was," Bill answered, squinting reflectively at the floor.

"Feelin' ther 'portance o' my detective biz, last night, an' desirin' an interview with Percific, to larn ef he was my parental dad or not, I waltzed down to the jail and axed to go in. The guard instanter applied the countenance of his brogan to the rear of my rank-an'-file, and lifted me six feet six. Oh! but wasn't I mad! I jest slung a piece o' quartz down his throat, and sloped. He slanted in the same direction. It was nip and tuck. He nipped an' I tucked. First I know'd I didn't nothin'—that is, I know'd more about it afterward than I did before. Ye see, I dodged into a lot o' bushes, and went end over end down into a sort o' pit, 'bout ten feet deep, which had been choked over with vines, sticks and leaves. Wonder I didn't break my neck; 'twouldn't been o' much account, tho'. Well, to make a short story long, when that plagued guard peeked down, thar I lay leader'n a bat—a reg'lar smilin' seraph, you bet, not so much as an ear wrigglin'. S'posin' I had swum across, he spit a cud o' terbacker down inter my eye, an' sloped, blame him! I then resurrected myself, and took a synopsis. What d'ye s'pose I see'd! Right in ther side o' the pit, cluss to the bottom, was a hole runnin' back inter teddy firma, more'n big enuff fer a man ter crawl through!"

"Well?"

"Well, ef I wasn't excited, I don't want to go to Congress. I allowed I'd found whar sum pirut had hid his nuggets, and inter that hoel I went after 'em. I crawled, and I crawled, and finally cum to an end, when I liked ter cracked my skull on a stun overhead. Et was a big flat one, an' I tried ter raise it, an' got it part way up, and whar d'ye s'pose I found myself?"

"In China!" Doll laughed, believing he was getting off a practical joke on her.

"Nary a time!" Bill chuckled. "That aire stone opens up inter the very jail whar Percific is caged—ef it don't, I'm a shad!"

"You are fooling me!"

"No, I ain't. I jest got a glimpse o' Percific, an' then let the stone back, an' heer I am natural as life. Now, ain't that ernuff to make a grasshopper laugh?"

"It is certainly good news. If danger comes to the prisoner, we can release him."

"An'danger is arter him, like chicken arter a worm. Everybody's excited outside. Percific has been accused o' bein' Captain Crime, an' the'r a goin' ter try him this afternoon at three. King's at the head."

"Never mind; the 'Queen's' in the deal," Doll observed, grimly. "You're a brick, Billy, and you can call me your pard, in truth, after this. Now just you sit down, mum, while I gather my wits together. I hardly know where to begin first in this matter."

She bowed her head in her hands in deep meditation, while Little Bill fished a stump of a cigar from his pockets, and settled back for a smoke.

Denver Doll was usually quick to think, but she took her time now.

At last she arose, and donned her hat.

"I'm off," she announced, smiling. "Keep your peepers open."

"You bet!" Bill responded.

CHAPTER IX.

A CASE FOR BILLY.

DENVER DOLL had examined the vicinity of the jail so closely that, after Little Bill's narration, she knew almost the exact location of the pit he had referred to.

Leaving the hotel, and emerging into the street, she found that the boy's words were true in regard to the excitement connected with the approaching trial.

Every one was abroad, and the neighborhood of the jail was swarming with people, eager to get another glimpse at the prisoner; but the window was so high up in the wall of the jail that they could not look in, and the guards positively refused any one admittance.

It was in the vicinity of the jail that Doll met Harrison Ainsley again.

He gazed at Doll keenly as she approached.

"Looks rather dubious for the fellow who is locked up in that jail, don't it?" he remarked.

"You do not feel very sorry, it appears," the girl returned.

The words appeared to give him quite a start.

"Indeed, may I ask why should I?" he demanded, rather gruffly.

"Oh! there are natural reasons. I did not think you were the man you are, Harrison Ainsley, or I should hardly have undertaken the job for you. As it is now I will go through with it. You have been altogether too hasty in two ways. First, in dismissing your nephew, Ned."

"Allow me to advise you that I manage my own business affairs, miss!" the banker interposed, flushing.

"That's all right, when you can do so, but when you have to employ a detective to help, you should not spoil the whole matter through temper. Another thing you've made a bad move in is your attempt to prove your own son, Pacific Phil, a rascal and desperado by making him out Captain Crime!"

"You lie! I have attempted nothing of the kind, nor is Pacific Phil my son!" the banker cried, in a rage.

Denver Doll laughed.

"It is useless to deny it, when my spy overheard, word for word, your interview with Pacific Phil last night. The whole matter of it is, you are an outright rascal, and you know it. Now, do you know what I'm going to do?"

Harrison Ainsley did not reply. Fear and rage had equal hold upon him, and his face was as white as death.

"I will tell you," Doll went on. "I am engaged to ferret out the robbery, and have the trap nearly ready to spring. I don't like to mix in your other matters, but if I see any agency of yours in the trial this afternoon, I'll expose you before everybody. Do you understand?"

"Yes. But I did not start this movement!"

"So I am aware. But you were mighty tickled, when it sprung into shape. As I have said, except to liberate Pacific Phil I shall take no personal hand in your family quarrel, unless employed to do so by the right. The more shady and quiet you keep yourself, the less liable you will be to get yourself into trouble!"

With which consoling bit of advice, she turned, and strode away.

The banker glared after her, trembling with rage.

"Oh! you she-vixen! curse you!" he hissed.

"You have sprung a surprise on me that I little suspected. And for the time being I am in your power, and at your mercy. Philip will escape in spite of me, no doubt, but wait! Felice may come, yet. Then, it will be my turn—ha! ha! yes!"

Denver Doll had given her word that she personally, would not interfere in the family quarrel unless employed to do so on the right side. She spoke thus for herself; but not for Little Bill Bethel.

She went back to her room, in the hotel, and found the lad there, fast asleep, and snoring like a full-fledged butcher; but his eyes were open the moment she permitted, purposely, an incautious footfall upon the floor.

"Another good sign!" the Detective Queen said, inwardly.

"Hello! back a'ready, sis?" the lad yawned.

"Why the blazes don't ye let a feller sleep?"

"Why did you awaken? By the way, Billy, I've got a case for you!"

"Then pan out, for I haven't had a square meal in I-don't-know-when!"

"But it's not sweitzer case, Billy—nothing more nor less than a detective case."

The juvenile ferret puckered up his face awry.

"Can't masticate that—give a feller the dispepsery!" he said, soberly.

"But off from the profits you can live like a duke."

"What's that, Dollbaby—a burro?"

"Oh! no," Doll replied, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "A duke's a feller like me, you know—a U. S. D. Savy? How'd you like to walk about with a Government breast-pin upon your vest?"

Billy leaped to his feet, with sparkling eyes, and strutted about with his thumbs under his armpits.

"Well, I should snicker ef that wouldn't be gallus!" he cried. "I'd jest rise from thar to Congress. A good long step and large fees will fetch it ye know."

"Well, Bill, I've concluded not to pay much attention to anything but the robbery case, for the present; so if you think you can work Pacific Phil in for a case, sail in. Do you remember everything you heard?"

"Like a book. Gulped it down like an allegator."

"Well, now, Pacific Phil may need some personal aid, and maybe you can by extreme care become of some use to him. Supposing you get into the jail, and see what you can do for him, in the detective line. If you make a success of the case, a badge you shall have!"

The boy's eyes fairly danced with excitement and joy, and he executed a jig on the floor.

"Forty fishhooks!" what would my gal Kate say, ef she were to see me now?"

"By the way, I forgot to tell you, Billy, that I was through the Ainsley residence, in every part, but there's no woman concealed there."

Billy put his finger to his nose, and winked, knowingly.

"Git out!" he said. "Did ye go into a sort o' wing on the nor' side o' the shebang?"

Denver Doll meditated a moment.

"I think not," she said finally. "As I remember, all the rooms were within the main house."

"Thort so. That jest settles it that my gal Kate is up-stairs in that wing. Guess I'll go, now. But, hold up. Maybe ye better fork over a recommend ter his nibs, Percific. Slightly acquaint w' him, but ye see these big chaps w'at calls 'emselves men, don't generally take much stock on little rats like me, an' we're liable ter have ter swaller a lot o' insults, ef we ain't got backin'!"

Doll smiled at her young disciple's logic, for there was certainly some truth in it; so, seizing pencil and paper, she wrote:

"PACIFIC PHIL—Anticipating your need of the services of a detective, to help you out of your dilemma, which is known to me, I send you my aid, Billy Bethel. You can safely put confidence in him, and trust to his keen judgment, for he's as sharp as a razor, and has a detective's skill far beyond his years. He will be of undoubted service to you. I will see what can be done for you at the trial."

"Very respectfully,
DENVER DOLL, U. S. D."

"There! now scoot, and see if Pacific wants anything before the trial," Doll commanded, giving him the paper, which the boy pocketed, and was gone like a flash.

Before seeking the secret passage to the jail, he sauntered about the prison for awhile, to see if anything of extra importance was going on; but there was not, the crowd being about all to be seen.

Just as Billy was moving away, Ned Ainsley came up.

"Hello, Billy," he accosted. "How's your health? Do you know you turned my luck for the better, my boy?"

"Sorry of that," Bill declared, soberly.

"Goodness gracious! why?"

"Because gamblin' is a bad perfesh. I only jest wanted to show ye ye didn't know shucks about cards. Say, d'ye know the feller in the jug?"

"Not personally."

"Wull, ye know he's Ainsley's boy, Philip, don't ye?"

"I've had a suspicion that way."

"Well, it's so. Inter the family history?"

"Not very deep. I've had it intimated that uncle and cousin were not exactly on friendly terms."

"Bet they ain't! I got the case down fine. The old cuss wants to crush the young cuss flatter nor though an elefant had stepped on him. To do this, a job's bin put up to prove that Percific is Capt'in Crime. Can't ye give a lift, at the trial, to prove different?"

"You bet, if there is any need of it. I say, is that Denver Doll your ma, Bill?"

William snorted.

"Nary a time! Hain't got but one. Doll's my partner, ye see—young, purty, unmarried, sharp as lightnin', rich, amiable, and a reg'lar brick. Why don't ye sail in, buddy, an' capture her."

Ned smiled at the boy.

"I'm afraid I'd not make a hit," he answered.

"Pshaw! She's sweet on you. Kinder like her, too, don't ye?"

"Well, to tell the truth, she has rather taken me in and done for me," Ned admitted, blushing.

"He! he! he! so have I!" squealed Bill, with a malicious grin. "Know'd I could draw ye out, like fetchin' a hile to a head, w' fly-blister. Oh! but won't I have a sweet toothful fer Dollbaby! But, never mind, Neddy; I'll fix it up all-right fer ye with her. You'll have a reg'lar puddin'!"

And away trotted the young r-gamuffin, with a tantalizing laugh.

"Blame that young rascal," young Ainsley muttered. "He's worse than any imp. Ten to one he'll make a laughing stock out of me in Denver Doll's eyes."

While Little Bill hurried away, rapidly.

"This chinnin' ain't allers bizness," he soliloquized. "Hope I don't meet another 'quaintance I know. I must git in a word w' Percific, afore they yank him out fer trial!"

CHAPTER X.

PACIFIC'S FOES AND FRIENDS.

HARRISON AINSLEY went home; his rage unabated, and raved about for awhile, but finding no relief in this, returned once more to the street, where he saw Deputy King, who was superintending the erection of a sort of stand, upon which the trial of Pacific was to take place.

As soon as he could, conveniently, the banker called him aside.

"Excuse me," he said. "I am Harrison Ainsley, the banker of this place. I understand that you have captured the desperate, Captain Crime?"

"Bet yer boots we have, boss, and we're goin' to try him, this afternoon."

"I'm glad of that, don't you let him escape justice. He has robbed me repeatedly, of large sums of money. I suppose you will lynch him?"

"That will be impossible. There are other detectives here, and for me to allow such a proceeding would be to lose my position as deputy. I'll guarantee his conviction, after which Detective Sinclair of the Union Pacific, will hand him over to the courts. The only thing is to prove him the man. Are you greatly interested?"

"Well, to that extent," the banker said, slipping a note of large denomination into his hand. "I would prefer, quietly of course, that some sure and certain disposal be made of the fellow, at once."

"All right. I will see what can be done to accommodate you, sir."

"Perhaps I may triumph yet!" the scheming banker muttered, exultantly, as he strode away. "One thing is certain—if Philip gets free, I shall have to look sharp to save my life. So I may as well take advantage of first grip."

He went thence to his banking-office, near which he met Ned Ainsley.

"Well, boy, I guess you might as well come back, and resume work," he said, good-naturedly. "I am pretty well satisfied you are not the thief."

"Are you, really?" Ned replied, with sarcasm. "I thank you, but I do not care to again enter your service, sir."

"Indeed! I suppose you can make a living on gambling, you young vagabond?"

"If I choose, though my style of gambling and yours varies, somewhat. I consider mine the more honorable mode."

The banker was nonplused; he did not know just what reply to make.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, finally.

"By the way Ned, I wish you'd stay at the bank this afternoon. I have some important business, outside."

"So have I!" the nephew returned, significantly, and turned away, leaving the banker in a rage.

"Can he know, and does he seek to revenge himself on me, at the trial?" was the thought that flashed across his mind.

In the meantime let us look after Little Bill, and ascertain how his errand resulted.

After leaving Ned Ainsley, he made his approach to the pit, in a roundabout way, and taking a good look around him, to make sure that he was not observed, leaped into it.

Entering the tunnel, he crept underground for some distance, until he came to an abrupt ending of the passage. Then reaching upward, he exerted all his puny strength, and managed to raise and displace a large flat stone overhead, which was one of many that formed the flooring of the jail.

In a moment more he was standing in the apartment where Pacific Phil was imprisoned. He was half-reclining, now, his head resting upon his hand. There was a look of surprise upon his face as he saw Billy.

"Hello! where in the name of all that's wonderful, did you come from?" he exclaimed.

"Sh! Compress your bugle!" Bill warned, with a nod toward the door. "Mum's the word! Ears out there sharper than a needle. Know me?"

"Well, I reckon I've seen you. Once seen, your mug is never to be forgotten!" Pacific said, dryly.

"Dunno. Seen purtier, an' hev seen wuss. I'm William Bethel, E-s-q., an' heer's my reckermend."

Pacific Phil received the message and read it, surprise beaming from his eyes.

"Denver Doll is extremely kind," he remarked thoughtfully.

"Hang it, so am I!" chipped in Bill, "or else I wouldn't 'a' rooted through the dirt to reach you. So come down to biz, Percific. Aire ye goin' ter employ me or no?"

"What to do?" the prisoner demanded, regarding the midget, amusedly.

"Why, ter take hold o' your case, straighten out all the kinks, and win the game fer ye, in short order."

"Well, boy, your mistress seems to think you something of a phenomenon, so I suppose I better employ you. What do you know relative to my affairs?"

"Heaps! Got a phonographic pate—scoops in all it hears, and all ye've do is to turn the crank, and out she comes! It was me who got the p'int's furst. Snuck in behind your royal dad, and roped in all the slack that passed 'twixt you. The old gent don't exactly dote on you, does he?"

"No!—nor I on him. A greater actual villain never lived than he!"

"Right! He's a reg'lar old sockdolager o' Satan, and he's goin' to make it gosh-darned tropical fer you, too! D'ye know they're goin' ter test yer neck this afternoon, to see if thar's any injy rubber in it, worth workin' up inter galluses?"

"So bad as that?"

The buckskin sport was perfectly composed.

"Yas, so bad as that. You 'pears to take it mighty cool!"

"Oh! yes. There's little use getting excited over trifles!"

Bill felt rather disconcerted at this.

"Poor show for scarin' a ten thousan' dollar job out o' this feller," was his thought.

But he went on:

"Well, let's git down to biz. I'll do the axin' and you the answerin'. Arter I've got all the necessary p'int's down, we'll compare opinions. There's nothin' like quizzin' and unearthin' p'int's. In the furst place, thet aire singer at the theater, war your wife w'ot bekim substracted frum ye, not?"

"Yes."

"Thort's so. That was also my side pardner, Kate. We've bin workin' a streak o' pay dirt, nor'west, since I kin remember. Kate got a highfalutin' notion she was tired, an' skipped an' left me. Found her screechin' down heer at the theater. Did you an' Kate hev any chiders?"

"None."

"Then that cooks my goose. Tho't I could work in a claim o' relationship. Don't matter, tho'. I kin look out for Willum, you bet! Now you've got kinder a notion you'd like to hitch in harness ag'in ef things could be made all right?"

"It would be the happiest day of my life if I could again reclaim her as my own!" Pacific averred, with honest fervor.

"That's the checker!" Little Bill assented, lightly. "When a feller talks lover-like I te to see him spit it out as if 'twere comin' out o' his boots. I reckon I can fix things up for you ef I can git a word w' Kate. She'd break her neck to 'oommydate me any time. But ye see she's disappeared!"

"Disappeared!"

Pacific Phil uttered a groan.

"Yas, she's disappeared, but yours truly knows whar she is. She's locked up in yer old man's house."

This announcement did not seem to appease the anxiety of the buckskin sport. His eyes gleamed angrily, and his face wore an expression of sternness not habitual there.

"There will yet be a day of reckoning if I am permitted to get free!" he declared, grimly.

"To purceed: What's the name o' the woman w'ot kicked up the rumpus 'twixt you an' my gal Kate?"

"Felice Falqueer."

"Phew! That's a possummy name. She was hired to do it by yer parent?"

"Of course! I never saw the woman—or, more correctly, girl—before."

"Know whar she lives?"

"Luckily, no, or I should have choked her ere this."

"You calkylate the old 'un has got the forged certificate?"

"He said so. I am also satisfied that he has the papers relating to my wife's fortune."

"And ye want these, I reckon, purty bad, lik?"

"Most assuredly. They are worth much to me."

"What'll you give if I gather 'em in?"

"You can command any reasonable price, my lad. I am not poor, though I have been a rolling stone for some years. As I said, the papers are of utmost importance to me, and you can do me no greater service than to secure them for me, and also intercede in my behalf with Kate."

"Bet I will! Anything else? I've got to get back before I'm discovered."

"I do not think of anything now, because I do not know what the next few hours may bring forth. I suppose you haven't any idea of how the hearing will turn out?"

"Not much. Lucks kinder as if there might be a tight-rope dance. The deputy's ag'in' ye, an' the old man's ag'in' ye, an' ye know two sech chaps kin work a pile o' mischief. My pard Doll, though, is goin' ter vote yer ticket, an' so is yer cousin Ned, too. If my nibs kin do anything, I'm thar."

"Well, thar's some good prospects, then. You'd better go now, for some one might pop in unexpectedly."

"All right. Ef we can't do nothin' fur ye to-day, mebbe we can to night. By-by."

And in a moment the young sleuth was gone, covering his retreat with the large stone and leaving no trace behind him to tell that he had been in the cell.

He and Denver Doll were alone in the secret, barring Pacific Phil.

CHAPTER XI.

A BRACE OF ROGUES AND A PRIMITIVE COURT.

BANKER AINSLEY was seated in his office looking over the stock-exchange list of a Chicago paper, when Beau Blonde, the crack card-sharp of Nugget Notch, entered unceremoniously, and seated himself with all the *sang froid* peculiar to his species.

The banker looked over his eye-glasses at the man with a stare of inquiry.

"Well sir, what is your errand?" Ainsley demanded, as the gamester settled himself comfortably into a chair.

"Oh! I just dropped in to have a little chat. Haven't seen you around at the rooms lately."

"I do not belong to the profession—that is why, likely," Ainsley answered stiffly.

"Indeed! Did one night of bucking the tiger weaken you?" Beau retorted tauntingly. "But let us drop that. I am out of money, through a bad run of luck, and want a lift!"

The banker scowled.

"You are liable to get one, if you hang around here much longer! I am sole agent for a very practicable lifting machine!"

"You should also start a comic newspaper, you are so facetious!" Blonde sneered. "But let this parley drop. I want money, must have it, and you must give it to me!"

"Indeed? Where do you get so much authority?"

"Oh! that is easily answered. When I mention that I have your secret, what is the use for you to demur?"

This seemed to stagger the banker a little, and his eyes became fixed upon the handsome gambler in a stony sort of glare.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

Beau Blonde smiled mockingly.

"Pshaw! what is your object in trying to bluff a man of my type?" he demanded. "I have accidentally come into possession of all the data appertaining to one of the most important secrets of your life. If you desire, I'll start in and give you a full-dress rehearsal, tragedy and all!"

"That is unnecessary!" the banker demurred, nervously, his face of an ashen hue. "How much can you get along with? I am at low ebb to-day, owing to heavy shipments and local demands far above the usual run."

"Well, seeing as this is the first time I have called on you, and you are not flush, just deal me out a thousand, and call it square for the present."

Ainsley looked angrily at the gambler for a moment; then going to his safe, unlocked it, and returned with a package of crisp new hundred-dollar notes, which he handed over to the man who claimed to know his secret.

Beau Blonde glanced at the package sharply, and then shoved it carelessly into his vest-pocket.

"Thank you," he said, with an obsequious bow; "your ready willingness is duly appreciated. I presume you are interested in the desperado trial, to-day?"

"What causes you to think so?"

"Oh! I merely surmised," Beau Blonde answered, with a laugh. "One is apt to form opinions, you know!"

The banker was puzzled, but in this instance was too wily to show it.

"Well, suppose I am interested—what of it?"

"Oh! not much; only I thought that, as a business man, if you were particularly interested, I might be of some service to you—see? I have a grudge—merely a slight one—against this Pacific Phil. Now if you are interested—and since I propose to do what I can for him, ha! ha!—why, you see, a few hundred, say five, might cause me to be doubly active."

"Thank you, Mr. Blonde, but I am not in need of any assistance in the matter, as I have already secured all the help necessary, I believe."

Beau Blonde smiled again—one of those sinister, confident smiles that years at the card table had made peculiar to him. He also brought his fist emphatically down on a table near at hand.

"I cannot help my own cause out without helping yours, Mr. Ainsley, so plank down another V. hundred, if you please!"

"But I don't please!"

"Then I am pleased to squeal. Did you ever witness a lynching, friend Ainsley, and notice how nice a noose adheres to a man's gullet? Supposing—"

"Stop! say no more, you hell-hound, for you cannot get another dollar out of me to-day. Come some other time when I have money."

"Very well. I'll not forget it," and the card-sharp at once arose and quitted the bank.

Once outside, he laughed softly to himself.

"Pon honor, I had no idea of striking such a lead," he mused. "I just ventured, blindly, to hint that he had a secret, and he tumbled immediately into my racket. Ha! ha! ha!"

The trial, or, more appropriately, the hearing of Pacific Phil, had been set for three o'clock, and long before that hour a large crowd was gathered in front of the platform which had been erected in front of the jail.

This platform was built about four feet above ground, and was designed for the occupancy of all directly connected with the trial.

When the appointed hour arrived, the *dramatis personæ* upon the platform was somewhat striking.

In the center stood a sort of judicial pulpit, in which presided the Union Pacific Railroad's detective, Mr. Sinclair. To his right sat Deputy Marshal King. On the left, a little in front, Pacific Phil was stationed, his hands bound behind his back; but there was an expression of defiance upon his face that told he was not ill at ease.

On his left was a bench, whereon were seated several persons.

Denver Doll was first. Next to her sat Bill Bethel; then came Ned Ainsley, the mountaineer Falqueer and the man who had tipped his hat to Denver Doll at the Mountain View Hotel, but whose name was unknown.

At all events, he was a fine-looking man and attracted much attention.

On the right of Deputy King was a similar bench, upon which was seated Beau Blonde, a companion gambler named Red Eye, followed by six other rough-looking pilgrims, who appeared to be better fitted to cut throats than serve the aims of justice.

Fronting the stand was the sea of faces, not one alike, and a photographer would have been delighted to catch the scene with a single glance of his camera.

Finally Detective Sinclair rapped upon his desk for order.

"The trial, or, more properly, the supplementary hearing of the case, will now commence," he said, "and, in behalf of all concerned, I wish to request that perfect order and quiet be kept. For the benefit of those who may not know, I will make the following statement:

"Subsequent to the terrible disaster on the Union Pacific road I was sent here in the interests of the company—to offer a reward for the capture of the man or men who caused the accident, and who were said to be members of a band of desperadoes styling themselves the Terrible Tribunal. I came as directed, and offered a reward for the ringleader and his band of subordinates. In response to my notice, Deputy Marshal King, who came here some hours in advance, put in an appearance and desired the reward, claiming to have the original Captain Crime, of whom, probably, you all have heard. Allow me to say I was not quite satisfied, and to settle the matter, I, in behalf of my employers, and the Government as well, ordered the forthcoming hearing. The question to be decided is whether the prisoner at the bar is or is not the so-called Captain Crime, the outlaw. First witness stand up and be sworn for the prosecution."

Deputy King responded, and the oath was administered.

"Make your statement!" Sinclair said.

The deputy cleared his throat:

"I was sent here," he began, "by my superior officer immediately after the disaster, to ferret out the crime, if possible, and bring the offenders to justice. I arrived in time to witness a street duel between the prisoner and a gambler, named Beau Blonde. I arrested the former for the criminal offense of dueling. After I had arrested him I became convinced, from previous descriptions I had received, that I had the famous desperado. I set to work, hunted up men who had seen him, and have the honor of now presenting them for examination."

"Why did you not arrest Beau Blonde?" Sinclair demanded, sharply.

"For the reason that he did not provoke the quarrel."

"That is no excuse. Handcuff the man!"

King dared not disobey, and Beau Blonde submitted with poor grace.

"Next witness!" ordered Sinclair.

This man, Pete Smick, on being sworn, clumsily testified that he had seen Crime once, when he stopped a stage, and "he allowed the prisoner was the same chap."

It was a patched up piece of testimony at the best, and Sinclair's cross-questioning completely broke the fellow down.

The same result followed in the case of the other ruffians, except Beau Blonde, who stood up and coolly swore that he had been captured and robbed by Captain Crime several times, and would swear on a stack of Bibles that Pacific Pete and Crime were one and the same person!"

At this juncture, some one in the crowd shouted:

"He's a liar and a thief, and ye can't depend on a word he says."

Denver Doll testified next. She related all her experience on the night of the train wreck, and stated that Crime was much more diminutive in stature than the prisoner, and she could detect no resemblance between the two.

Little Bill then had his say, and a brilliant one it was, too, although somewhat illiterate. He corroborated Doll's testimony, but, as privately agreed between them, neither alluded to Pacific Pete as Harrison Ainsley's son.

Falqueer next took the stand.

"Whv, ye gol-darned fools," he said, "this monkeyin' is preposterous! I know this Pacific

Phil. He's bin up nor' est for years. Bin around the vicinity o' the Atlanta mines for past six months, till a day or two since. Why, he's Harrison Ainsley's son, and this is ther way the old man takes to get even with him!"

"Is this true?" Sinclair asked, turning to Pacific Phil.

"Perfectly, although this testimony is unexpected. Denver Doll can tell you as to the latter reference."

"It is true!" Doll said.

"Bet it is!" chimed in Little Bill.

"Allow me to state the balance," the unknown stranger said, rising. "The prisoner and myself have been companions for several years as prospectors and miners, as I can produce ample proof, and we have not been in this vicinity over ten days."

"No further testimony is needed!" Sinclair said, rapping upon the box. "Pacific Phil is pronounced guilty of the charge preferred."

Then little Bill Bethel sprang to the front of the platform, and yelled:

"Hurrah for Percific Phil, the squarest pard of 'em all—hip! hip! hooray!"

Probably, never in all the days of Nugget Notch was there ever such a hearty cheer given as in response to Little Bill's toast.

The crowd fairly howled themselves hoarse, and while the party of the prosecution slunk away, the victorious left the platform, and made their way toward the hotel, Pacific Phil's stalwart manly form in the lead, and Denver Doll by his side.

It was an open defeat to villainy, and a striking exemplification of a motto that every one should consider: "Right is might, in the end."

Perhaps among those bitterly disappointed at the termination of the trial was the banker, Harrison Ainsley! and scarcely less so was Deputy Marshal King—both beaten at their villainous conspiracy.

Some time after the conclusion of the hearing, and a little before nightfall, the trio of villains, Beau Blonde, King, and Ainsley, met by chance, near the bank.

Each wore a rather grim expression, and each stared hard at the other.

The banker was the first to speak:

"Well, it has turned out a fine kettle of fish, hasn't it? he growled. "Mr. B., I thought sure you could be depended on, at least. Your blockheads would have been a disgrace to a penitentiary."

"Sorry! very sorry! but I did my best sir!" the gambler declared, obsequiously.

"Never mind!" King consoled. "We've been beaten; I'm whipped! we all are! but, I am not conquered! Will you put up a thousand on that, banker Ainsley?"

CHAPTER XII.

A WRONGED WIFE'S SCORN.

DENVER DOLL, Pacific Phil, and Little Bill went at once to the former's room at the Mountain View hotel, for the purpose of holding a conference, as it were, over what was their next best course of action.

The stranger, who had been introduced to Denver Doll, by Pacific Phil, as Mr. Conroy, was also invited into the confab, as he was the father of Kathleen, Pacific Phil's bride, who had been so wrongfully separated from him.

"We have had a good victory, to start with," Denver Doll said, "but, just mark my word—there's trouble ahead, yet. Three men were badly disappointed at the result of the hearing, and they were respectively Harrison Ainsley, Beau Blonde, and the deputy-marshal, King. There you have a trio of as evil scamps as ever lived, and they have the power to do a pile of mischief, in a camp like this."

"I cordially agree with you," Conroy said.

"My identity is not known outside this circle; therefore I am in no danger. But, you, Phil, had best keep close to cover, as I should deem it unsafe for you to reappear, on the street, where you would make a good target for a lurking assassin. We know not what means the enemy will adopt to get the advantage, and it is best we should be careful!"

"Well, perhaps you are right," Pacific assented, "but I mightily hate to be shut up. It goes against my grain the worst kind. I want revenge on my inhuman and unnatural parent, and I'm bound to have it!"

"There's time enuff fer that, Pacific," put in Little Bill. "Jest you leave ther hull caboodle to us detectives, an' I'll save you a first-class slice of revenge, all fer yerself. Recollect I've taken a case in tow, an' it's 'portant that ye should yield to my superior judgment!"

"Look out, Bill, you endanger your jaw by launching into such a torrent of choicewords," Doll averred. "Oh! that's only the eddication I'm gittin' thro' 'accatin' wi' you!" Bill flashed back. "I'm in fer a snooze now, so I'll be fresh fer to-night. Got dead loads of bizness then."

"I also have much to look out for," Doll declared. "So, Mr. Conroy, we will leave our charge, Pacific Phil, in your care while we are on duty endeavoring to put things to rights."

The two men then retired to their room, after which Denver Doll and her young apprentice indulged in a short nap, for it was hard to tell what the next few hours would bring forth, or what active work they would have to do.

When they awakened it was already early evening, and their room was quite dark.

"It's time we were on the alert!" Denver Doll announced. "What are you going to do, boy?"

"I'm going to try and get my bread hooks on them papers w'ot Pacific wants," Billy answered. "Arter that, I reckon I'll try to interview my old gal, Kate."

"Well, go ahead, you young rat, but look out that ye don't get caught in a trap."

"Call me a shad if I do," Billy replied. "I know I've got kinder a curious job before me, but I've got the pluck to tackle it, anyhow. Used ter live on trout plucks up in our camp. Oh! but I tell you they war boss. What's your lay out fer ter-night?"

"I'm going to try and learn the import of the meeting to-night, which I spoke of as having been ordered by the Terrible Tribunal. I am quite desirous of knowing what new scheme that august body has on foot; and, too, I reckon I may stand a chance of spotting some of the ringleaders, so that I will know them when I see them again."

"Guess it's you what better look out!" was Bill's opinion. "Ef any of that gang gits their digits on ye ag'in, remember it will go hard with you, for Little Bill won't be around to help you."

"I'll try and bear that in mind," and Doll smiled. "You had better start now, and see what you can root out. Here's a duplicate key, if you should return here before I do. If I don't return, you will know I'm nailed."

About dusk, Harrison Ainsley entered his residence, in by no means the best of humor, and sought the parlor, where Miss Bessie was seated, engaged in reading a novel.

She glanced up, carelessly, and then resumed reading.

"Well!" the banker growled, throwing himself into a chair. "What have you to say?"

"Nothing particularly, as I know!" Bessie replied, in seeming surprise. "What did you expect me to say, papa?"

"I want you to give an explanation of yourself. What secret of mine do you know, girl? Speak! don't lie to me, or it will be the worse for you!"

"Secret? Why, papa, I was not aware that you had a secret; indeed, I wasn't!" the girl exclaimed, in apparent astonishment.

"Bah! You cannot deceive me. I have a secret—a deep, dark secret at that—and I am satisfied that you have in some way come into possession of it. Come, own up now!"

"I cannot own that which is not true," Bessie replied, firmly. "You never tell me of any of your matters; so, how could you expect me to know your secrets?"

"If you are lying to me, girl, you shall repent it. Another thing I want to know! Where did you get that valuable ring you wear?"

"I don't know, sir, as that matters particularly to you!" Bessie flashed back. "Please remember that I am of age, and you have no right to demand too much of me."

"What? Throw that in my face, will you—I who have supported you and kept you above want? I demand to know where you got that ring. Refuse to tell me, and I will turn you from my house!"

Bessie grew pale at this, and trembled. She knew that he meant all he said. If turned upon the world, to earn her own living, what would she do?

Still, she hesitated, evidently loth to betray the secret of how she came into possession of the ring.

"Come! come! speak up!" Ainsley cried, sternly.

"I will tolerate no equivocating."

"The ring was made a present to me, by an acquaintance. Now, is that enough?"

"By no means! Who is this acquaintance? I want to know!"

"A gentleman—a suitor for my hand!"

"The devil! His name?"

"Beau Blonde!"

The banker leaped from his chair, as though he had received an electric shock.

"Beau Blonde!—the infernal gambler and scamp! You entertaining his suit?"

"Exactly! He is a perfect gentleman, and more than that, if you must know, my betrothed husband!"

The banker was evidently too astonished to speak, for he paced the floor like an enraged tiger.

"I presume very likely you sanction the match," Bessie said, sweetly, "as it would be real cruel of you not to!"

"Very, very likely!" was the savage answer, as the banker strode from the room, and went upstairs.

Passing along the hall toward the front of the house, he presently came to a halt, and gave a sudden jerk upon a common nail which was in the northern wall.

In response, a portion of the wall, which was but a partition, at that point, slid aside, and a small room was revealed, which Ainsley entered, closing the panel behind him.

The room was neatly furnished with a couch, chairs and table and carpet. Upon the couch, attired in the same dress she had worn at the theater, partly reclined the beautiful singer, Rienzo, or as we shall hereafter know her, Kate, the wife of Pacific Phil.

Her face was calm in expression, as the banker entered, but her eyes gleamed with a fire not usually there.

A movement of her arm discovered the fact that both wrists were secured separately with a band,

to which was fastened long, slender chains which were connected with the wall.

The banker seated himself with a suave smile, quite in contrast with the expression of countenance he had worn, when down-stairs.

"Well, my fair Kathleen, how do I find you this evening?"

"Precisely as you see me—the prisoner of a villain!" Kate replied, coldly.

"Bravely—I may say dramatically spoken, dear!" Ainsley returned, with a show of apparent enthusiasm. "Do you know, when you fire up that way you increase my adoration for you, tenfold?"

"And at each time I set eyes upon you, my loathing for you increases a hundred-fold, you monster!"

"Tut! tut! you are a little too harsh. You know you secretly love me. So I will pass your seeming rudeness by, as I am aware that you only use it as a feint, because you wish to tantalize me. By the way, I told you that my scapegrace son had been arrested on the charge of being the notorious outlaw, Captain Crime. Well, they gave him a fair and square trial this afternoon—I insisted on that, although he had threatened, publicly, that he would take your life and mine. What do you suppose the result of the trial was, dear Kathleen?"

"I have not the slightest idea!" was the reply of the wronged wife. She lay there, more resembling a marble statue than a living person, for all the color had gone from her face. But her eyes still burned with that unconquerable determination not to yield to the impression caused by the words of the villain before her.

"Well, I will tell you the result," her tormentor went on. "I used my utmost exertions to break down the crushing evidence that was brought up against him, but all to no purpose. He was proven, fair and square, to be Captain Crime, whose deeds of terror are widely known, and was sentenced to be hung, to-morrow, at sunrise. It is not improbable, however, that he will be taken from the jail and lynched, to-night."

"Well?"

Calm as calm could be, not a tremor in her voice, or an expression of sorrow upon her face, Kate gazed at her enemy sternly, as she spoke.

"Well," the banker went on, "poor Philip must die, and with his death, of course, perishes all your hopes of ever being reunited to him, bigamist and scoundrel that he is."

"Not by any means. Do you know, Harrison Ainsley, that I have long since given up the idea that poor Phil ever had another wife than me? I it was who am to blame for our separation, when I should have clung to my husband, though ten thousand women had claimed him. I should have stood by him, and given him a chance to vindicate himself."

"But the certificate—the proof of the former marriage with Felice Falqueer—"

"Was a cleverly trumped-up forgery designed to part us, and the young woman was an adventuress, hired for the purpose. I believe this as I believe that I am living!"

"But, child! child! who could have had any desire to commit such a gross outrage and wrong? Ah! but you are fearfully in error."

"I am not! You ask who could have done this wrong—who, indeed, but you? Who turned his son from his house, because he loved me? Who aspired to my hand in marriage, because he had in some mysterious manner come into possession of papers that would bring me a fortune? Who, indeed, I ask, but you, scoundrel that you are? Is any further evidence necessary that it was you, too, who sent the adventuress to break up our happy home? Oh! Harrison Ainsley, there is a day of reckoning coming for you."

"Humph! you are getting unduly excited over nothing," the man growled, quailing under her glance. "Your diseased imagination causes you to say things that are utterly ridiculous."

"Think whatever you choose."

"That is a privilege I shall improve, most assuredly. We may as well understand each other. To-morrow Philip pays the penalty of his many crimes. Your disappearance has caused no remark whatever, as you were nothing more than a strolling mountebank. No one has, or will, take the pains to inquire about you. In your prison here you are snug and safe, and no one will ever suspect your presence. Therefore, here you remain until you go forth as my bride."

"Then here I will remain till I die!" Kate responded. "While death would be preferable to remaining in this vile durance, it would be doubly welcome to marrying you. Go, monster!"

"Thank you, I will, for I have some other business to attend to elsewhere. When I return, love, I hope to be received with open arms, as a tender lover like me should be. Ha! ha! ha!"

He took his leave, much to the relief of the imprisoned woman, who could but loathe and hate him as one utterly devilish and villainous.

CHAPTER XIII.

BILLY'S BOLD GAME.

After leaving the secret chamber, Ainsley also quitted the house and made his way to the bank, in the shadows of which Little Bill Bethel was lurking, like some imp of evil, as it were.

"I'll see if I can't trap these robbers to-night," he muttered aloud, as he unlocked the door. "It won't do for me to lose so much money, lest my depositors get uneasy. They little suspect that if it wasn't for their funds the bank could not exist. Humph! I'm counted a rich man, but I'm careful to keep my riches where they will not easily be found."

He flung the door wide open and entered. Barefooted, and like a shadow, Little Bill stole in behind him, not knowing what the next minute would bring

forth. For several minutes he could hear the banker stumbling about, then he uttered a curse.

"Not a match in the place to strike a light with, I'll swear," he growled; "so I shall have to let it pass. The drugged wine is on the safe, anyhow, and ten chances to one that will catch the thief, and there'll be a corpse or two in the town to-morrow morning."

Little Bill closed one eye.

"My, oh!" he mused. "Lucky I've got on to that. Bet a shad I'd 'a' soaked it all down. Wonder ef I'd better lodge in this coop ter-night or no? Old Ainsley is goin' to leave an' lock up. Ef I stay, I'm caged. Reckon a feller might dig out, tho', as these boards of the floor are easily pulled up."

It was on making note of this fact that he formed a determination to remain in the bank over-night, and make a search for the papers that were wanted by Pacific Phil.

After stumbling about for several minutes longer, the banker finally took his departure, taking good care to securely lock the door after him.

Bill listened until he heard his footsteps die away, and then made free to move around.

"I'm caged jest as nice as a monkey," he muttered; "an' ef I shouldn't be able to git out o' heer, they'd stretch my neck fer burglary, like enuff. So I must make the most o' my time. Guess the coast is clear."

He struck a match, and by its light took a view of the situation.

"Dunno if I better light a lamp or not. Kinder reckon not. Be dangerous if old man Ainsley were to pop around again. Hello! That's a wardrobe partitioned by a curtain, whar' a feller could hide in, perwidin' no one didn't peep in thar'. Can't do much 'thout a lamp, nuther. Guess I'll light up."

He accordingly lit a lamp, but turned it down very low. He then put his coat along the crack of the door.

His next move was to examine the interior of the desks, but found nothing that he wanted there.

"The old nut has got his papers in the safe," he muttered. "Wonder what sort of a cracksman I'd make?"

Kneeling before the safe, he studied the figures and marks upon the combination plate.

"A feller w'ot don't know the p'inters has to go it blind, an' I judge that's what I'll have to do. Allus was kinder lucky on lottery, seven-up, an' sich."

He then began to turn the knob and experiment on the numbers.

An hour dragged by, but he was apparently no nearer reaching the solution of the combination than at first.

"Drat it! I'll bet the feller w'ot got up this contrivance was a burglar himself. Got sum' brains myself, but not enuff fer this sort o' geography. Hello! I'm a shad ef I ain't fetched her!"

It was so. By a chance he had hit upon the right number! The door was open, and the interior of the safe was revealed to view. There were several compartments filled with books and papers, and a drawer which contained money in notes. There were also several sacks of silver and gold coin, and dust, which made the young ferret's eyes bulge out in wonder.

"My, oh! Ef I war a burglar, what a haul I could make," he commented. "Thar's enuff thar to buy a railroad, locomotive an' all, I'll bet. Ef it were only mine! Tain't no use o' wishin', tho'. When a feller's hands itches he must stick 'em in his pocket. I must s'arch fer them papers now."

With quick, deft fingers he examined everything in the way of a document that the safe contained, but to his disappointment he found no trace of anything he wanted.

"Fool's fishin' fer fun, an' nary a bite," he muttered, closing and relocking the safe. "The old cove must have his papers hid away in his house. Now, the next thing is sumthin' else. I must prospect fer a lead w'at'll fetch me out o' this trap. Be a joke ef I couldn't get out, dashed ef it wouldn't!"

Placing the lamp in its bracket, he began to examine the flooring, which was of rough boards and laid down with none too much precision.

After trying several which were securely nailed, he at last came to a short one that had not been nailed at all.

Lifting it up, he saw that the distance between the floor and the ground was something over a foot, sufficient at least for him to squeeze his body in when it became necessary for him to conceal himself.

He also made the discovery that there were several sacks of something stored there, where no one, supposedly, would be apt to look for them.

"Hello! Bet a hornet that's old Ainsley's gold, w'ot he's hid away fer fear as how some one would steal it!" Bill allowed. "Keen old rooster he is, ef I do say it. Wonder ef I better ockerpy the hoel or no? S'pect them robbers 'll be along sum time durin' the night, an' tho' I could get out o' heer w'out half tryin', I jest surmise as how I better hide in the curtained place yonder."

He replaced the board, and then, with the aid of the lamp, explored the curtained alcove, which he found contained a disused stove and some broken furniture.

He then placed the lamp on a table, blew it out, and groped his way into the alcove, where he perched himself comfortably on top of the stove, and waited!

There was no telling how long he might have to wait, for the robbers might not put in an appearance at all; but he was resolved to have patience until toward morning at least, and then, if no other way offered, dodge out when the banker came in.

"Reckon they couldn't keep me in jail anyhow, ef they did ketch me, unless they chained me up like a dorg. Hoels in the ground aire mighty convenient on c't an' a while!"

The minutes dragged slowly away—too slowly to suit the young detective—for no harder task could be imposed upon him than to keep still for any great length of time.

If he could only indulge in a good whistle, he thought it would be a decidedly precious boon of relief. But such a thing was out of the question.

Mum must he remain, for fear he would attract attention which was not at all desirable.

"Can't stop me from thinkin', anyhow," he mused.

"That's whar a feller kin get the best o' the hull caboodle of 'em. They can't stop 'im from shuttin' off his mind, nohow. Ef them robbers is only goin' to come, I wish they'd hurry up, 'ca'se I'd most orfuly like to squeeze in an interview wi' my old gal Kate somehow or other."

Seeing no prospect that he was likely to be disturbed very soon, he settled back into a more comfortable position, with the view of taking a nap.

But he had hardly closed his eyes when he heard some one at the door, and he was instantly on the alert.

He heard the key turn softly; then, after a moment, the door swung open, and two persons entered stealthily and closed the door.

They did not lock it, for the reason that there was no bolt upon the inside.

"Well!" one of the party said, in a hoarse voice, which Billy instantly concluded was disguised, "here we are again. We must clean the place out, altogether to-night, for it won't do for us to be caught here, which would likely be the result, were we to continue the raids."

"You are right. The sooner, the better, to suit me. First, you know, blame will be laid upon me."

"Pooh! you are nervous! But, I think, myself, that it will be best to slack up for awhile, and allow matters to simmer down. Did you bring any thing along to leave here that would be apt to throw suspicion upon Ned?"

"Nothing but a handkerchief, with his name stamped on it. That was the only thing I could find."

"It will serve all purposes. Now, I'll strike a light, and we will see what Ainsley has left in the safe for us!"

A moment later the lamp was lit, and the two night-hawks approached the safe.

Peering from between the curtains, Little Bill was able to make out that both wore top boots, long dark cloaks, slouch hats, and the face of each was securely concealed behind a heavy veil.

Nor could the young detective remember that he had ever heard their voices before, owing to their being changed purposely.

The two nocturnal thieves knelt in front of the safe, placing the lamp on the floor, between them.

One of them began experimenting at opening the safe.

"Some one's been fooling with this safe!" he growled. "It isn't the way it is usually left. Bet I'll have to work half an hour before I can open it."

"I hope so," Little Bill soliloquized to himself.

"While you're at it, I'll just try and skip out of this. Ortent to let 'em get away wi' the old gent's swag, I suppose, but dash me ef I don't want'er track these skunks to their head-quarters. That's worth a heap sight more than nailin' 'em now, when I ain't got no backin'."

It was a ticklish undertaking to cross the room, open the door, get outside and close it again, without being discovered, and Bill was well aware of it, but with that pluck that was characteristic of him, he made up his mind to try it, and run the risks.

The two burglars seemed intently engaged at the safe, and he had confidence that he could make his exit before they might look around.

Restoring one revolver to his belt, and grasping the other in his right hand, he tip-toed across the floor, with cat-like tread, toward the door, his every nerve strung to its utmost tension—his breath coming short and quick.

He advanced sideways, so that he could not be surprised by any sudden turn of the enemy, and in this way succeeded in reaching the door.

To raise the latch and open the door was the next important thing, but he accomplished it, with the same degree of success that had marked his movements across the floor.

On second thought he resolved to leave the door slightly ajar, and so doing, he was not long in putting himself at a respectable distance from the bank, but yet not so far that he could not see the burglars leave it, without being seen himself.

Here he waited patiently, for he calculated he could afford to be patient, as it was beginning to rain hard, and he could accordingly follow his foes, with less danger of discovery.

About half an hour passed; then he saw them leave the bank, and lock the door after them, after which they hurried in the direction of the Ainsley residence.

Like a shadow Billy followed in their wake, keeping just far enough behind them to feel safe from being seen.

He was so slight of form as to be easily mistaken for one of the blackened stumps that were scattered about the camp.

When within a dozen yards of the Ainsley dwelling, the burglars halted, and Billy stealthily glided into hearing distance.

"Well, I'll leave you here," the taller one said.

"I must hurry to head-quarters, for I ordered a meeting there, to take place an hour hence. I reckon the handkerchief will throw the suspicion on to Ned Ainsley."

"I should think so. When shall I see you again?"

"To-morrow night, likely, at the usual place. So—along!"

They shook hands then, and the shorter of the two moved away toward the house, while the other strode away up the gulch at a rapid pace.

Little Bill followed the latter. Though soaking wet, his ardor was not a bit dampened.

"I'm a shad ef I ain't beginnin' to see into this hyer case," he muttered, as he trotted along, which he was forced to do in order to keep anywhere near the object of pursuit. "Kinder gittin' off my own job onter Dollbaby's, but et's all the same in Dutch, I reckon. This hyar fellow in front belongs to the desperado gang, you bet, an' ef he's the captain o' the hull caboodle I shouldn't be surprised. Then that t'other feller war'n't no feller at all, but a gal in breeches. The banker's step-darter fer ducats! Phew! w'ot a rib-tickler! She's bin gittin' the step in on the old gent, tho', in bootiful shape. Wonder what he'll say when he finds it out? Bet he'll kick his self all over Nugget Notch fer a consarned burro!"

Further soliloquy was not for Billy, for he had fully his match in trying to keep up with the outlaw, who was a quick-footed pedestrian.

The route was through a rough and rocky part of the country, and the boy soon found his feet to be sore and bleeding, but he resolutely kept on, in spite of rain or pain.

It seemed to him, however, that the journey would never end, nor the outlaw's endurance ever tire, for soon he heard his footsteps dying out a good distance in advance.

"Go it, lemons!" the plucky boy gritted. "I'll be along some time next week."

Further on he came to an abrupt bend in the gulch, and was just in the act of rounding it when he was suddenly pounced upon and seized by the man whom he had been so persistently following.

"Oho! you young whelp, so I've got you at last, have I?" he roared. "I'll soon cook your goose, see if I don't!"

CHAPTER XIV.

UP IN A BALLOON.

The ruffian seized Little Bill by the nape of the neck, and strode on, dragging the boy after him.

Struggle as he would, the juvenile ferret could not get away.

Luckily there was not far to go.

Just around the bend was a large shanty, where it had once been designed to start a town, but no pay streaks being found, the place was deserted in favor of Nugget Notch, further down the gulch. Back of it a dismal, pine-wooded glen ran back into the mountains. Into this the outlaw dragged his victim, until they came to the mouth of a large cavern, which was entered.

A bright fire was burning in the center of the subterranean chamber, and surrounding it, seated upon various-sized blocks and fire-logs, were some two-score of masked men—all bewhiskered, roughly dressed, and armed to the teeth.

To Billy's horror, he perceived that Denver Doll was also there! A stake had been driven into a crevice in the floor, and she was securely bound to it hand and foot.

"Hurrah!" yelled several of the outlaws, as Billy and his captor entered. "Here comes the captain an' another prisoner! It's the kid, too!"

Captain Crime turned Billy over to the care of a couple of the men, and then turned to Denver Doll.

"Aha! so my gallant men have been lucky enough to catch a prize, have they?" he said, exultantly. "Upon my word, I am highly elated at your capture, my fairy detective. You came to the mountains to catch a tiger, and got caught yourself, eh? Ha! ha! ha!"

"Yas, boss," exclaimed one of the men, who was evidently lieutenant of the gang. "She dogged Barker, whose room is next to hern, at the hotel, and we cotched her sneakin' around the edge of the cave. I guess she's found out she was barkin' up the wrong tree."

"Not at all. I'm a woman to be sure, but I'm not afraid of any of you."

"Don't be quite so sassy, my pert miss, or I'll give a chance to prove your assertion!" the captain growled. "Pass around the liquor, boys, it's devilish dry!"

A large demijohn was produced, and a tin cup, holding fully half a pint. This was nearly filled, and the captain downed it at a gulp or so. His example was followed by the remainder of the crowd.

"Now, after we transact a little important business, we will have some sport. But, to the business, first. As I stated last night, we have as the organization of the order of Skull and Cross-Bones, got to look out, or the first we know we shall find ourselves in hot water, and at the mercy of the law. Since the sad railway catastrophe, several dangerous persons have come to Nugget Notch, who it is imperative we should remove; the serenity of our existence is not likely to be soon disturbed again. The citizens of the camp, in themselves, have not the gumption to hunt us down. It is these outsiders we have to fear. It is them we must remove. Luckily, we have two of the foremost ones in our power, now, and if we let them escape it is our own fault. They are the only ones that know our camp is so near to Nugget Notch."

"Goin' to spill 'em?" the lieutenant growled, gruffly.

"No! I want no more murder on my hands, than can be avoided. It is a wild night—the wind is blowing like fury. Do you remember this night, three months ago?"

"Shouldn't wonder ef I did! We sent Jem Hol, den a-kitin' that night an' he's never turned up-since. It's a sure way o' gittin' rid ov people, 'thout sinnin'."

"Well, now, the other cases that have got to be cornered, is that galoot, Pacific Phil, the deputy sheriff, King, and the railroad sharper, Sinclair. Then, it will be well enough to remove the banker, Harrison Ainsley!"

"That's cause your in snucks wi' his darter," put in Little Bill. "They're the ones what robs the bank, Dollbaby. I see'd 'em!"

"Shut up, you cursed little whelp, or I'll cut your throat!" roared the captain. "I'll have you know there's no back talk, here."

"Guess a feller can shoot off his mouth, ef he wants to," Bill muttered.

"Now, the way we'll work this thing," the captain went on, "is this: We'll send this precious pair off, to-night. To-morrow, we'll all go into camp in disguise, and hang around till night. I'll contrive to get all hands into the saloon, when in marches you fellers, in a body, all respectably dressed, and arrest the ones we want, as bein' members o' the Terrible Tribunal. You must have four noosed ropes ready, and the work o' yankin the men out and lynchin 'em, must be done quick. Bein' unexpected, thar'll be a big excitement, an' that's what'll help you along, an' give ye a chance to escape."

"That won't work—the hangin' part," the lieutenant grunted. "Better way will be fer us to be dressed as miners, an' let on to be drunk. While a couple o' us is a-callin' up an' treatin' the crowd, the remainder o' the gang kin run the men we want out o' doors, and knife 'em, an' then slide. Jest leave it to us, Cap, an' we'll fix it!"

"All right, Melvin; you're trusty, an' I'll go a hundred that any thing you undertake won't go wrong. Come, all hands, let's liquor up!"

The liquor was again passed around, and copious laughs were indulged in by each member of the Tribunal.

The captain then turned his gaze in the direction of the interior of the cave, and called:

"Rategan? Rategan?"

In response, an old man with a hump back, and hair and beard as white as snow, came hobbling forward, with the aid of a crooked staff. He was clothed in rags, and a filthy-looking object to behold, to say the least.

"Rategan, have you that balloon completed?" the captain demanded, scowling at the man, as if he would like to kill him.

"Yes, sir, yes, sir. It is all done and ready!" the old chap replied, in trembling tones. "What is your pleasure, sir?"

"Take the balloon to the gas vein on the cliff, and inflate it, and fix the basket to it. D'ye hear?"

"Yes, sir; yes, sir!" was the answer, and the miserable being hobbled away again into the interior of the cave.

Crime then turned to Denver Doll:

"And, now, my fairy detective, I have a little proposal to make to you. I am in want of a squaw for my wigwam, as the red-skin say, and I opine you're just suited to my eye. So I'll give you a choice of two fates. You marry me, swear fidelity to my cause, and all will be serene. Otherwise, I shall send you and the young imp up in a balloon, and you will eventually come down in the Pacific Ocean!"

"Chance the Pacific, Doll," sung out Little Bill. "Ther's many a slip 'twixt the beer-mug an' the tater-trap!"

"I will never marry you. So do as you like," Doll replied, with decision.

"Then up in a balloon you go. Release the prisoners, boys, and conduct them to the cliff."

The order was obeyed. Guarded by four men each, the two captives were led from the cave by the front entrance, and up the precipitous mountain-side to a large shelving ledge.

Here a large balloon was already inflated and anchored, a basket large enough to hold several persons being attached to it.

On reaching the cliff, the hands and feet of both captives were unbound.

"I won't be too hard on you," Crime said, with a villainous chuckle. "This balloon is inflated with sufficient natural gas to carry you ten thousand miles high. If you want to jump out when you reach the moon, do so! Boys, draw your revolvers! Prisoners, seat yourselves in the basket. If you attempt to leave it, you will be shot down, and your hearts cut out!"

Denver Doll entered first. Her face was very pale, but it was resolute.

"Come on, Billy," she said. "We'll try it, and run our chances anyway. We have death staring us in the face, either way you look at it, and we may as well run the risk of the balloon trip rather than be shot down here."

Billy looked decidedly dubious as he obeyed her request, but if they had to die, there could be little choice. By the balloon there might be a chance of escape.

The rain had ceased and the wind seemed to be decreasing.

"Now then, good-by!" the captain called out, when they were seated. "Glad to see you take it so coolly! When you get up to the moon, tell the Man that if there's any trails worth working up thar to let me know, and maybe I'll come up. Rategan, cut the anchor rope!"

The order was promptly obeyed, and the crowd gave a hoarse, exultant yell, as the air-ship rose gracefully into the blackness of the night, and was lost to view with its basket of human freight.

Shall we attempt to picture the feelings of the two victims of the desperadoes' vengeance? It would be a task beyond the power of pen. The sensation of awe was nearly as great as that of fear.

For several minutes the air-ship shot almost directly upward; then appeared to strike a counter current, and veered to the eastward.

Little Bill had held out bravely, but now began to cry.

Denver Doll, too, was greatly alarmed, but knew it could avail nothing to give way to grief. Instead, she sent up a feeling prayer to Heaven, to rescue them from their perilous situation.

Her heart beat faster, and her faith in the Almighty grew stronger, when, a few minutes later, she thought she detected a slight descending of the balloon.

"Don't cry, Billy," she said, cheerfully. "for we're not 'coners' yet."

"D'ye think so?" Bill asked, brightening up.

"D'ye believe there's any chance for us, Dollbaby?"

"Loads of it," Doll replied. "The balloon is slowly but surely descending, or else for once, I've lost my reckoning. I prayed, Bill, and this is the answer."

"Jerusalem! Jest give me the cue how to pray, and I'll buckle in fer all I'm worth!"

"That is as good as a prayer, Bill. The Savior knows our every thought, whether we utter it in words or not. If the balloon only continues to descend at this rate, we will strike terra firma without damage. The balloon must have sprung a slight leak, which is gradually letting the gas out. If the leak should suddenly grow larger, we would go down again."

But the leak did not grow larger, and little by little the balloon settled down between the rugged mountains, into a deep, dark ravine, where with no wind to drift it, the ground was soon reached in safety.

As the two friends stepped from the basket they beheld a camp-fire burning in the mouth of a little cavern, and heard an exclamation that sounded most pleasant to Denver Doll!

"Shimminy gracious! dunder und plitzen! vot ish dot!" and following the words the rotund figure of Yakie Strauss appeared in the cave entrance.

"Don't be scared, Yakie," Doll called out. "It is only I, Denver Doll, and my new pard."

And the two adventurers advanced into the fire-light. The cave had a pleasant aspect indeed.

Upon a pile of skins a very feminine-looking, well-dressed young fellow, with a jet-black mustache, was lazily reclining, but arose sufficiently to tip his sombrero to the Detective Queen.

Explanations at once ensued, Yakie listening open-mouthed to Doll's thrilling recital.

"Vel, py dickens! dot vas a duyfel of a schrape. I dinks you vas lie mit me," he ejaculated, incredulously.

"No! it's all gospel truth. And now, if you will give us the proper directions, we must strike out at once for Nugget Notch, for we shall be needed there soon."

"We will all go," the person on the skins said. "I am now thoroughly recovered, and I have important business there."

Doll pricked up her ears.

"You are a woman!" she said, more positively than inquiringly.

The other uttered a laugh.

"Yes, I am. I am going to Nugget Notch to, if possible, right a great wrong I once did!"

"Vot! Vot ish dis? You vas a voomans?" Yakie exclaimed in great astonishment.

"Yes, my kind friend, although I played off the man on you since you rescued me from the wreck."

"Oh! Gott in himmell! Ut I had know'd dot I'd neffer haif stayed here, & help me! Py shimminy, I was fooled yooost like a lunatics!"

"I think I know who you are, although I have never seen you," Denver Doll said. "You are the woman who stepped in between Philip Ainsley and his wife, and by a forged certificate, caused their separation."

"The same—Felice Falqueer. I did a terribly unjust deed then. I was a wicked fool, but I am a woman now. I recently learned that Pacific Phil and Kate were liable to meet in Nugget Notch, by chance. I set forth to effect a reconciliation."

"They are there, and you can retrieve, in a measure, the wrong of the past. Yakie, you rascal, you kept your secret well, but I found you out at last. Come, let's all set out at once!"

In a few moments the quartette were en route for the mining camp, some ten miles distant.

CHAPTER XV.

A GRAND CIRQUE.

PHILIP AINSLEY could not rest after Denver Doll's departure. To know that he himself was free, and his wife was a prisoner in the power of his villainous father, was worse than gall and wormwood to him, and he so told his father-in-law, Conroy.

"What is the use of our remaining here idle, when others are working?" he said. "Let us attempt the rescue of Kate, at least."

"I fear that, should we do this, we might interfere with the plans of our coadjutors, Phil," Conroy demurred.

"Pshaw! no. The boy's not liable to accomplish much. We can visit the house, taking my father by surprise, and force him to give up Kate and the papers, or—"

"Or what?"

"Kill him!"

There was no mistaking that the buckskin sport was terribly in earnest.

"I'm thinking he'd submit to death before he'd yield!"

"Because you don't know him. He can use considerable braggadocio, but at heart he is a coward. We can rescue Kate at least, as the young rat told me where she is."

"Well, I'm with you, if you think best, but we had better wait until the dead hours of night. We can work surer and with less publicity then."

Accordingly it was thus arranged.

About an hour after midnight they left the hotel, and made their way to the vicinity of the Ainsley mansion.

No one except themselves was abroad, and very few of the saloons had lights burning.

"I think the better plan is to quietly force an en-

trance into the house, and surprise the villain," Conroy said. "Then he can have no choice but to surrender."

"I agree with you there," Pacific Phil replied.

"Let us search for some means of entrance."

Convinced by examination that there was no chance to get in at the front, they made their way to the rear of the house.

Just as they were trying the rear door, a man suddenly popped around the corner of the house and approached them.

"Who's there?" Pacific demanded, quickly drawing and cocking a revolver.

"Only me—Falqueer!" was the answer. "Ef ye're goin' in thar, I wanten go, too, fer I reckon the old cuss has got my gal stowed away in thar. 'Scuse her, Philip, fer she means all right now, and set out ter cum lyar an' tell ye 'twere all a put-up job, thet certificat bizness, an' she said as how she couldn't rest til she see'd you an' yer wife reunited."

"I am glad she is so sensible!" Pacific Phil replied, coldly.

Examination proved that the door was bolted on the inside. The only way, then, was to burst the fastenings; so the three men put their shoulders to the panels with a will.

With very little effort, and no particular noise, the door was forced open; then taking off their boots, the trio entered the house.

A lamp was found dimly burning in the kitchen.

Pacific Phil took possession of this, and with revolvers drawn, the trio moved toward the front part of the house.

A glimmer of light came from under the parlor door, and accordingly it was thrown open and they entered.

As they did so, they were followed by four other persons, who had quietly entered the house.

They were none others than Denver Doll, Little Bill, Felice Falqueer, and Yakie Strauss, who in passing the house, had seen the trio burst open the door, and had followed their movements.

In the parlor, an unexpected sight met the gaze of all.

Lying on the floor, partly raised upon one arm, was the banker, Harrison Ainsley.

A pool of blood had oozed upon the carpet, from a wound in his breast, and it was evident that his life was fast ebbing out, for he stared at the visitors, wildly.

"Speak! what does it mean, father?" Pacific Phil demanded, quickly kneeling and supporting his sinful parent.

"It means that I have got my just deserts!" was the gasping reply. "I have been a wicked man, and have sinned against you, all; but I ask your forgiveness, humbly. I was shot by my step-daughter. She came late, and I accused her of being the bank robber. She shot me and fled. Oh!—ah! ah!" He fell back, then, and expired.

A few words should be sufficient to close this narrative.

Kate was found and released, and Felice Falqueer joined the hands of the wronged husband and wife together, and asked their forgiveness, which was freely granted.

A search of the premises discovered the papers relating to Kathleen's fortune, and also the false marriage certificate, which was destroyed.

As soon as morning dawned, Denver Doll visited Detective Sinclair, and divulged the particulars of the whereabouts of the desperadoes.

A band of volunteers was at once organized, and a descent and attack made upon the rendezvous.

The outlaws showed fight, but the odds were against them. They would not surrender, however, and were literally mown down before the fire of the indignant citizens.

But one arrest was made, and that was of the Captain, who, as the readers have probably surmised, was discovered to be none other than Beau Blonde the gambler!

Despite Sinclair's protestations, he was taken to the nearest tree, and lynched.

Thus ended the career of the worst band of outlaws that ever infested the vicinity of Nugget Notch.

Harrison Ainsley was buried in Nugget Notch, where Pacific and his wife decided to settle down.

By the latter, Little Bill was informed that he was not her child, but a harmless waif whom she had found wandering in the mountains. Both she and Pacific insisted, however, that the boy should remain with them, as their own, but Denver Doll forthwith objected.

"You can't have him," she decided. "I'd about as soon lose my right hand, as part with Billy."

And William nodded approvingly.

"You bet!" he said. "Much obliged to ye, Kate, but ye see me an' my gal, Dollbaby, is the hossiest detective team o' the day, an' ye couldn't separate us no more'n tho' we war glued together wi' cement."

So, after receiving an ample and fitting reward, our two friends took their departure from Nugget Notch.

Before leaving, Denver Doll received a proposal of marriage, from Ned Ainsley, which she firmly declined.

"I feel highly flattered, Mr. Ainsley," she answered, "but I must respectfully say no, as I am not in the market."

So, as Philip and Conroy were about to resume the bank, Ned was obliged to console himself with a clerkship.

The Falqueers soon left for their home in the Atlanta district, and, would you believe it, Yakie Strauss went along! And it is not improbable that he and Felice will sooner or later link their fates together!

THE END.

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